

The enchanting new novel by
the acclaimed author of *A Little Scandal*

PATRICIA
CABOT



LADY
of SKYE

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For Benjamin

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[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

[22](#)

[23](#)

[24](#)

[25](#)

[26](#)

[27](#)

[28](#)

[29](#)

[30](#)

[31](#)

[Author's Note](#)

LADY
of **SKYE**



Lyming, Scotland

February 1847

The ferryman was dead.

There was no doubt about it. The fellow had no pulse. His skin was like ice. His pupils were dilated, his eyes glassy and staring. Reilly Stanton didn't need a medical license to tell him that this man was no longer among the living.

But Reilly wasn't the one who needed convincing. It was the wizened fisherman stooped over beside him who seemed to be suffering from some doubts.

"What's ailing him, then?" the old man asked, his breath turning instantly to steam in the cold winter air.

"Aye." The fisherman's question was echoed by several of his peers, all of whom had come to stare down at the corpse, as well as at Reilly, who'd had the ill judgment to plunge into the frigid water after the drowning man.

"I'm afraid," Reilly said, lifting his dripping head from the dead man's equally sodden chest, "that he's gone."

"Gone?" The eldest of the fishermen blinked down at him. "What do you mean, gone?"

"Well, passed on." Seeing the blank expressions on the faces around him, Reilly tried again. "Expired."

The word *expired* had always worked well enough on the families of Reilly's patients back in Mayfair. It was clear, however, that delicacy was wasted on these particular fellows, and so Reilly said, enunciating with difficulty through teeth that were beginning to chatter with the cold, "I'm afraid your friend is dead."

"Dead?" The old man exchanged incredulous glances with his companions. "Stuben's dead?"

Reilly rose to his knees—no small feat, since his once fine breeches were stiff with frozen

saltwater—and looked longingly toward the alehouse. At least, it *looked* like an alehouse. It was the structure nearest the pier where they now stood, and through the fog Reilly could see that there was a sign swinging above the door, and warm and welcoming lights in the windows. An alehouse, a whorehouse, Reilly didn't care what it was, so long as he was soon in it, drying off and warming up before a fire, preferably with a glass of whisky in his hand.

But first, of course, there was the dead ferryman to be seen to.

“But that canna be,” the toothless fisherman insisted. “Stuben canna be dead. He's never died before.”

“Well, that's the nature of death, isn't it?” Reilly managed a sympathetic smile. “We tend to do it just the once.”

“No' Stuben.” Around the corpse, shaggy gray heads nodded emphatically. “He's gone under many a time, has Stuben, and he's no' died before now.”

“Well.” Reilly tried to picture some of his more learned peers—Pearson, for instance, with his ubiquitous cigar, or Shelley, with that ridiculous silver-handled cane he didn't need—standing on this desolate pier, arguing the semantics of death with this motley group, and failed.

Well, Pearson and Shelley had too much sense to have signed on for such an assignment. Too much sense, and nothing like Reilly's blue-eyed, golden-haired impetus.

He said, “Well, gentlemen, I'm afraid he didn't make it this time. I'm very sorry for your loss. But he was clearly intoxicated—”

This was, of course, the grossest of understatements. The ferryman had been so blind drunk Reilly had almost asked if there wasn't some other boat he could hire for the trip across the water. But he'd stopped himself at the last minute. What was the worst, he'd wondered, that could come of a drunk ferryman? That the boat might run aground, or worse, sink?

So he'd drown in the frigid and tumultuous waters off the coast of the Scottish Highlands. So what? It wasn't as if he had anything much to live for, anyway. Christine, back in London, would hear of his drowning and would have to live with the knowledge that Reilly Stanton had died in an effort to win her love. . . .

Of course, when the stupid man had lost his footing and slipped into the sea just as they were docking, Reilly hadn't given a thought to his own safety, much less to what Miss Christine King was going to think. He had plunged without hesitation into the icy water and pulled the old man, dead weight though he'd been, back to shore.

It was only now, standing there soaking wet, shivering like a dog, that it occurred to Reilly he'd missed yet another wonderful opportunity to make Christine sorry for what she'd done. He'd come so close to a romantic death! He could almost hear the ladies back in Mayfair:

“Darling, did you hear? Young Dr. Stanton—the eighth Marquis of Stillworth, don’t you know—died in the wilds of the Hebrides, trying to save another man’s life. I can’t imagine what that heartless Christine King was thinking, slipping a man like *that* the mitten. She must have been out of her head. Such a self-sacrificing, noble gentleman . . . handsome, too, from what I hear. Poor girl is beside herself with grief.”

Well, he had certainly botched it. And because the old duffer had up and died on him despite his best efforts, Reilly couldn’t even write home and mention, ever so casually, about how he’d managed to save a life his very first day on the job, damn it all.

When was his luck going to change?

“I’m sorry about Mr. Stuben,” Reilly said, to the ferryman’s friends, “but he was well past feeling anything when he went, if it’s any consolation. He was quite intoxicated. Now if you good gentlemen don’t mind, I’m quite cold and wet through, and I’d like to get out of this wind—”

“That’s the thing.” Several hoary heads wagged. “Get ’im out of this wind. Someone go for Miss Brenna.”

“Already done,” a toothless gent assured them. “Sent the boy for ’er, soon as I seed Stuben go under.”

“Good lad.” The eldest fisherman sighed. “Well, I’ll take his head, you take his feet. Ready? Ayuh.”

Reilly stood, the bitter wind throwing salt spray all around him, as gnarled hands seized the body of the ferryman and lifted it. Then the solemn-faced processional moved with maddening slowness toward the nearest structure, the one Reilly had been hoping so fervently was an alehouse.

Left alone on the dock, Reilly glanced around. Buffeted by the wind and waves, the ferryboat thudded dully against the side of the pier. His bags and trunk were still aboard it, but as he’d been the only passenger, that was all, save the ferryman’s empty bottles, which rolled noisily back and forth across the deck. Other than the dead ferryman’s friends and a plethora of vociferous seagulls swooping about overhead, there was no one around. Reilly hadn’t exactly reckoned upon anyone meeting him, communication with the mainland being what it was, but he’d thought there might at least be someone to take his bags. . . .

Well, never mind. There’d been a death, after all. He supposed the bags would be safe enough for now. Wrapping his cloak about him—though the ice-encrusted material did little to shield his body from the wind—he caught up to the dead man and his entourage. They were headed toward the only building he could see through the fog, that building in which there promised, from the lights in the windows, to be a fire if nothing else.

Reilly fell into step beside the fishermen, and when one complained of weariness, he took a turn at

holding the dead man's head.

Then another of the old men, clutching his chest, stepped aside, and Reilly found himself holding not only the dead man's head, but his upper torso, as well.

Then a third fisherman bowed out, coughing with alarming, body-wracking spasms. It wasn't long before Reilly had slung the ferryman over his back and was bearing the full of his weight, while Stuben's friends shouted encouragement and approval at him. Thank God, Reilly thought grimly to himself, there was no way *this* was going to get back to Christine. Romantic as she might have thought his death, there wasn't anything the least romantic about *this* particular situation.

He staggered toward the alehouse—clearly an alehouse, he could see now, though the name of it on the wind-battered sign—The Tortured Hare—was not very encouraging. But as soon as the door was yanked open, Reilly was bathed in a wave of beer-scented heat, and he was relieved to find that whatever else it might have been, The Tortured Hare was at the very least warm, dry, and still serving.

And full of people. At the announcement of one of his new companions—"Stuben's gone in the drink again, and this 'un fished him out"—there was a collective murmur of excitement, followed by a flurry of movement as men hurried to lift tankards out of the way of the women who darted forward to place an enormous plank across several benches someone had set near the hearth.

"Put him down here," commanded a large, middle-aged woman in a fairly unsullied apron and cap. "Right there, on the table."

Reilly complied, though "table" was not the word he would have chosen to describe the makeshift structure onto which he lowered the cold, lifeless body. No sooner had the man once known as Stuben met the hard planks, than the woman was hurrying to undo his sodden clothes, barking orders at everyone within earshot as she did so.

"Flora, fetch a bottle of whisky. Blankets from the upstairs cupboard, Maeve. There's a pan of water over the fire in the back kitchen, Nancy. Fetch it, and find some rags. Has anyone gone for Miss Brenna?"

"Sent the boy for 'er," one of the fishermen assured her.

"Good," the woman said.

Miss Brenna, again? Who the devil, Reilly wondered, was this Miss Brenna? A peculiarly ugly name in Reilly's opinion, an opinion shared by his friends Pearson and Shelley, who'd unanimously declared Brenna the most hideous name for a female in the English language, with the possible exception of Megan. It was, they'd decided, almost guaranteed that any woman christened with the name Brenna would be cursed with multiple chins, overly large front teeth, and a distinctly horse-like countenance. And during the course of their admittedly not very scientific investigation into the veracity of their theory, they had yet to be proved wrong.

The ferryman's clothes were peeled off until he lay there, quite naked, under the gaze of everyone who happened to be in The Tortured Hare—which included, Reilly saw, the alehouse's staff, all of whom were women and some of whom looked astonishingly young. Even more astonishing, these young ladies did not seem the least bit shocked at the sight of the corpse or its state of undress. Even as it was subjected next to the indignity of being swaddled in hot rags, dropped from a pot of steaming water held in the girl Nancy's hands, none of those hardened Highland lassies gave the cadaver a second glance.

“Um,” Reilly felt compelled to say, when his teeth had ceased chattering enough to allow speech, by which time the dead man very nearly had been covered from head to toe in hot cloths.

The woman—clearly the proprietress of the place—spared him a single glance. Then she snapped, “Maeve, dunna stand there like a ninny. Get the gentleman out of those wet clothes and under a blanket.”

Reilly looked with alarm at the very determined young lady coming toward him. He took a hasty step backward and raising both hands exclaimed, “Um, no, no. That's not—I mean, I'm fine. Really. I just think someone ought to tell you, madam, that that man there is—”

But Reilly, whose only previous visits to Scotland had been for the occasional hunting trip, during which he had had little or no contact with the natives, was ill prepared to defend himself against the single-minded purposefulness of a typical Gaelic maid. In a thrice, Mistress Maeve had hold of his cloak and then his coat, and was wrenching them both from him in a manner that caused him to suspect her well used to undressing reluctant customers . . . and to what purpose he had only too certain an idea.

Short of resorting to fisticuffs, Reilly saw no way of deterring Maeve from her goal, which seemed to be stripping him as naked as the corpse that lay before them . . . at least until he found himself standing on the far side of the room, literally backed into a corner, his waistcoat and shirt gone now, as well as his coat and cloak, while a very determined set of fingers worked at the fastenings to his breeches. . . .

“That,” Reilly said, seizing the wrists just above those fingers, “will be quite enough, I think.”

Maeve blinked up at him, her expression not at all what he'd expected. Instead of looking abashed, the girl's mien was distinctly kittenish.

“She said I was to get ye out of yer wet things,” the maid reminded him.

“Yes,” Reilly said. “Well, I'd like to keep my trousers just now, if it's all the same to you.”

“I don't think ye ought to,” Maeve said. “Like to come down with the quinsy, if you do.”

“Or the rheumatics,” called another female voice.

It was only then that Reilly noticed young Nancy, the girl who'd been dispatched to fetch hot water for the ferryman, had returned, and was watching them both with rapt attention.

“Right,” Maeve said, staunchly. “Or the rheumatics. You wouldn’t want to be coming down with the rheumatics—” Maeve’s gaze roved over his naked chest. “Not a fine young man like yerself.”

Reilly, perfectly convinced now that he’d stumbled into a den of lunatics, gave Maeve’s wrists a tug that brought her to her feet. He then pried her fingers from his waistband, thus preserving what was left of his dignity.

“I will,” he said, resolutely steering Maeve away from him, “risk it.”

Now clad only in a pair of soaked breeches and equally sodden boots, Reilly saw that his fears of being unmanned before the entire village had been ill-founded: no one—with the exception of Maeve and Nancy—was paying the slightest attention to him. The patrons of The Tortured Hare seemed to find the contents of their ale tankards more interesting than the half naked man in the corner, and a good deal more fascinating than the fully naked one stretched out upon the table in the center of the room.

All except for the tavern’s proprietress, that is, who was calling to the ferryman, “Wake up. Wake up now, Stuben.”

Reilly, oddly touched by the woman’s tenacious refusal to admit the obvious, said gently, “Madam, it grieves me to inform you of this, but the truth of the matter is, Mr. Stuben is dead.”

The woman froze, a hot cloth, which she’d been about to drop over the ferryman’s nether regions, steaming in her hands. She eyed Reilly very astonishedly indeed. “Dead?” she echoed.

The word appeared to have a riveting effect on the tavern’s patrons. Suddenly, all heads swiveled in Reilly’s direction.

“Er . . . yes.” Now that he’d managed, at last, to attract the attention of nearly every person in the room, Reilly became acutely aware of his near nakedness. The blanket that had been suggested earlier seemed a long time coming.

Nevertheless, he had a duty to perform, and perform it he would.

“Yes, madam,” he went on. “Dead. He has no pulse, nor has he taken a breath since I pulled him from the water. I hate to tell you this, but I fear your efforts, though valiant, are rather useless at this point.”

He noticed that the patrons of The Tortured Hare suddenly seemed a good deal more interested in the man on the plank now that it appeared he was not alive. In fact, some of them were straining their necks to get a better look at him. A dead ferryman, Reilly supposed, was eminently more worthy of

attention than a live one.

“Dead?” The woman looked down at the cadaverous visage below her. “Stuben? But he’s never died afore.”

Reilly raised an eyebrow. “Yes,” he said, wondering if everyone in the place was daft, and if so what he as the village’s only physician was going to be expected to do about it. “Well, this time, I’m afraid his plunge was fatal. I’m very sorry to be the bearer of bad news. I did everything I humanly could for him, but I’m afraid the water was just so cold, and he is as you can see rather advanced in years.”

Reilly thought it wisest not to mention the dead man’s level of intoxication at his time of death. There were ladies present, after all.

“He just wasn’t strong enough to make it this time,” Reilly said. “Now, if it wouldn’t trouble you too much, I wonder if you could send someone down to the ferry for my things. I’d like to change—”

He was interrupted by the violent banging of the front door as it flew open to reveal a tall figure, swathed in a heavy dark cloak, the ends of which whipped smartly in the bitter wind.

“Oh, Miss Brenna!” The proprietress of The Tortured Hare looked immensely relieved. “Thank God you’re here.”

Reilly looked with interest upon the figure in the doorway. So this was the Miss Brenna everybody kept talking about! Well, she certainly didn’t disappoint. She was tall enough to be a Brenna, surely. Only a few inches shorter than he was, by God, and he stood just over six feet tall. The cloak hid her figure, and the deep hood her face, so he couldn’t quite see if the rest of her fit her name, but she certainly *looked* an Amazon. Pearson and Shelley would be right pleased to hear it.

“Stuben’s gone into the drink again,” one of the fishermen informed her. “And that one said he’s dead.”

“Who?”

The voice was *precisely* the sort he’d expect from a Brenna, deep in pitch and not at all feminine. Reilly was congratulating himself on being an excellent judge of womankind when a gloved hand parted the folds of the cloak, swept back the hood . . .

. . . and very nearly caused him an apoplexy. Because there was no double chin here, nothing in that countenance that could be construed as the least bit reminiscent of a horse, except perhaps the wild mane of copper-colored curls which tumbled, perfectly unrestrained by net or comb, from the top of her head. In fact, this particular Brenna was all that was comely and fair.

As he was only too capable of attesting, considering the fact that beneath her cloak the girl was wearing . . . a second glance proved it . . . a pair of *men’s trousers*.

Yes, *men's trousers*, which clung suggestively to her slim thighs, and were tightly cinched about the waist with a thick leather belt, into which had been tucked the ends of a bulky green sweater. On the girl's feet Reilly observed a pair of sturdy leather boots.

The sweater and the boots hid some key attributes, but the trousers were magnificent. Reilly had never seen a woman in trousers before. Christine, he was quite certain, would sooner have paraded in a potato sack than anything remotely resembling pants.

Still, it was a fashion innovation that, though it might not have reached Paris or London as yet, Reilly felt he could whole-heartedly support. In truth, he felt quite overwhelmed by its impact, enough so that it was a moment or two before he became aware that the girl was speaking again.

"*Who* said Stuben was dead?" she demanded, in that mannish voice that now seemed so at odds with her extremely feminine appearance.

A dozen fingers pointed in Reilly's direction, and a second later he found himself pinned under the gaze of a pair of eyes that were not only the bluest, but also quite positively the shrewdest, he'd ever seen. He had no hat to snatch from his head at the sight of her—Maeve had appropriated that, as well as his coat and cloak—and so could only bow a little at the waist, morbidly conscious of his state of near nakedness.

"I did," he said, inexplicably unnerved by the brightness of her gaze. "I said it. I pulled him from the water myself. He had no pulse. He was ice cold—"

"Who," she asked, blinking once, "are you?"

He noticed that Miss Brenna, unlike everyone else whom he'd encountered since crossing the border, did not possess a Scottish burr but spoke as God and the Queen intended, with a good clean English accent.

"Stanton," he said. "Reilly Stanton. I'm the one who accepted the position—"

She had already looked away from him, and was striding toward the corpse.

"—you all advertised." Reilly watched as she wrenched the dead man to his side, then moved behind him. "The physician's position. I'm here to begin my appointment." Noting that no one looked very comprehending, he added quickly, "I'm licensed, of course, by the Royal College of Physicians. I'm a Fellow of the College, as well—Oxford, actually—and I studied in Paris. . . . I say, perhaps you didn't hear me, but that gentleman is really quite—"

To his utter disbelief, the girl plowed her fist—with enough force to cause a hollow thudding sound, which surely would have smarted if the fellow hadn't already been dead—into the center of the corpse's back, exactly between his shoulder blades.

“—dead,” Reilly said. “I’m terribly sorry. I did everything I could.”

It was at that moment that the ferryman opened his mouth and spewed a fountain of rum and seawater onto the floor, splashing the boots of everyone around him, including Reilly.

Blinking groggily, the previously dead ferryman managed a sheepish smile.

“Sorry ’bout that,” he said.



“*W*hat advertisement?” she asked him.

Reilly raised his incredulous gaze from the resurrected man to the face of the girl who’d come to stand before him. She was so tall that she had only to tip her chin slightly to look him in the eye. The top of Christine’s head, by contrast, hadn’t quite reached the middle of his chest.

“What advertisement, Mr. Stanton?” she repeated.

Reilly heard himself say, “But he was dead. That man was dead. He had no heartbeat. I listened to his chest. There was nothing there.”

She glanced casually back at the ferryman, who was enjoying the congratulations of his friends and neighbors, well pleased at being the center of attention and even more pleased by the steaming cup someone had thrust into his hands.

“Oh,” she said. “The cold usually stops his heart for a bit. It just takes a good thump or two to get it started again.”

Reilly shook his head. “No wonder they were all saying he’d never died before. How many times have you brought that old fellow back from Hades?”

“Once or twice,” she said.

He grinned. “More like half a dozen times, I’m sure. I must say, I certainly never saw any literature espousing that particular method of reviving patients while I was in Paris—”

“Oh,” she said, with a short laugh. “Well. *Paris*.”

The laugh was accompanied by an eye roll. The girl clearly did not think much of Paris.

“You should know,” Reilly said, his pride pricked, “that I studied under some of the finest minds in medicine in Paris.”

“Well, the finest minds in medicine didn’t do you a bit of good bringing Stuben round, did they?” was her reply.

Reilly frowned. "I don't make a habit of going about thumping my patients on the back."

"Maybe you should," the girl suggested, sweetly. "You mightn't lose as many of them."

He glared at her. He thought he was going to have to amend his opinion of her. She was a head turner, all right, but she was also a bit of a—

"But then, you seem to be accustomed to losing things." The young woman's blue-eyed gaze dipped below Reilly's face to roam across his bare shoulders and down the furred center of his chest, until it came to rest suggestively on the waistband of his breeches.

Reilly, for the first time in a very long time, felt himself flush. He also felt a sudden and completely ridiculous urge to shield himself from that penetrating gaze.

Refusing to allow her the victory of knowing she'd embarrassed him, he folded his arms across his chest and said, "The loss of a shirt is a small price to pay for a life saved." Even, he added mentally, the life of a feeble-minded drunkard.

He did not utter these last words out loud, and yet Miss Brenna seemed to be thinking them as well, if the single eyebrow she cocked was any indication. But then, perhaps she was only reflecting upon the fact that it was she, not he, who had ultimately saved foul Stuben's pitiful life.

If such were her thoughts, however, she restrained herself from mentioning them aloud. Instead, she asked once again, "Now, what advertisement was it, Mr. Stanton, that brought you here?"

"It's *doctor*, actually," Reilly said. "*Dr.* Stanton. And I mean the one from *The Times*, of course."

The girl, that single eyebrow still cocked, looked dubious. "From *The Times*," she said, flatly. Clearly, she did not believe him.

This, of course, nettled him nearly as much as the insulting manner in which she'd dragged her gaze across his bare chest. He glanced around for his clothes and spied Maeve, having apparently forgotten all about both the whisky and the blanket he'd been promised, hanging them up before the fire.

"I've got the response to my letter of inquiry here," Reilly said, striding across the room to seize his waistcoat, then reaching into its pocket.

The lining of the waistcoat was as sopping wet as its exterior, everything that had turned to ice out on the pier thawing steadily in the heat of the public room. It was some time before he was able to draw a sodden sheet of paper from its pocket's depths.

Only the minute he brought it out into the light, he saw it wasn't the one he wanted. It was the letter from Christine, the one he'd been wearing close to his heart since the ill-fated day of its arrival. Now

it was only a damp sheet of pinkish stationery, creased and recreated too many times, upon which just a few strokes of handwriting—still noticeably feminine, Christine’s script, like the rest of her, being all that was womanly—showed.

The young woman they called Miss Brenna lifted an auburn eyebrow. “*That* doesn’t look like an advertisement from *The Times*,” she said.

Grimacing, he stuffed the pink, pulpy mess back into his pocket and fished out another one.

“Here it is,” he said. “The response to my letter, which was in response to the advertisement. It’s from Iain MacLeod, the Earl of Glendenning—”

A word fell from the girl’s lips that was so foul, the only time Reilly could remember ever having heard it before had been on the docks of East London, those first few nights after Christine had broken off their engagement, when Pearson and Shelley had insisted upon finding him a whore with whom to ease the pain of his broken heart. The girl’s voice, being so deep and distinctive, carried the curse across the room until it reached the ears of the alehouse’s proprietress, who immediately detached herself from the ferryman’s side.

“What is it, Miss Brenna?” the woman asked, worriedly. “Was this one here rude to you?” She leveled a reproving gaze at Reilly. “Watch your manners, sir. This is a respectable establishment, and I willna have my guests insulted. I appreciate your carryin’ Stuben all that way, but I willna stand for anyone slightin’ Miss Brenna—”

Reilly, taken aback, said, “Now see here, madam. I didn’t lay a finger on your Miss Brenna, and I resent the implication that I behaved in any way that might be construed as untoward—”

He broke off as the party whom he’d supposedly wounded so grievously reached out and snatched from the older woman’s hands the bottle she held. Reilly, who had only just begun to recover from the shock of having heard such foul language from lips so fair, was even further shocked to see those same lips wrap around the mouth of the bottle as the young woman quite unapologetically sucked back a healthy swallow of whisky.

Reilly had never in his life seen a woman drink whisky from the bottle—or even from a glass, for that matter. Christine had drunk wine occasionally, but never anything stronger, and certainly never from anything except cut crystal.

Still, although he was shocked, he wasn’t unpleasantly so. This was certainly the kind of behavior he’d have expected from someone who’d had the misfortune to be named Brenna.

She brought the bottle away from her lips and handed it back to its owner.

“Sorry, Mrs. Murphy,” she said, not looking the least bit apologetic. “It wasn’t that one. It’s *him* again.”

Mrs. Murphy looked taken aback, but apparently by this piece of information, not, as Reilly was, by the girl's drinking habits. "Oh, dear," the older woman murmured.

"I'd better go—" To his great disappointment, the Amazonian Miss Brenna closed the edges of her cloak, shielding from him the sight of those lovely thighs. "—and see if I can't get this straightened out."

"Oh, my," Mrs. Murphy breathed. "Really, Miss Brenna, I think you hadna ought to go alone—"

"I'll be all right." She tossed some of that unruly red hair and added, "Keep Mr. Stuben warm, and make sure you get some tea into him. Not whisky, but tea. Understand, Mrs. Murphy?"

"I understand," the older woman murmured. "Only do be careful, Miss Brenna. There's a thick fog blown in, and the way is bound to be icy—"

The girl just gave an airy wave of her hand. "Dr. Stanton's the one who looks as if he could use a whisky," was her parting comment as she jerked her lovely head in Reilly's direction while starting for the door. "And a dry shirt, if you can find one big enough for him."

And with that, Reilly realized, he'd been summarily dismissed.

"I say," he cried. "I am not done—" The door to The Tortured Hare slammed shut, very nearly in his face, and brought him up short. "—speaking with you."

"Never mind Miss Brenna now," Mrs. Murphy said in motherly tones. She hurried toward him, finally spreading the long-ago proffered blanket across his shoulders. "Let's get you nice and dry. You must be frozen through. Miss Brenna's right about there no' bein' a shirt in the entire village big enough to fit you . . . well, exceptin' for Lord Glendenning's, p'raps, but his lordship's not known for loanin' out his shirts. You'll just have to have a glass of this, then, to warm you up until your own clothes are dry." She poured from the bottle which had only recently left Miss Brenna's lips.

Reilly took the glass the proprietress thrust at him without really noticing it, his gaze still fastened on the young woman who'd departed so abruptly. He could see her quite plainly through the window—once he'd wiped the condensation on the pane away with a corner of the blanket—swinging into the saddle of a gray mare whose legs were only very slightly longer than her own.

"Astride," Reilly muttered to himself. "Well, that goes without saying."

He had never seen a woman ride astride before. Indeed, he hadn't known many horsewomen in his life, his mother and sisters infinitely preferring to take a phaeton round the park back home. And Christine had been terrified of horses. She had not to his knowledge, even owned a riding habit, let alone a sidesaddle.

Well, neither, apparently, did the Amazonian Miss Brenna. But she wasn't about to let that stop her. Reilly watched as she gave the gray a kick with her heels, and suddenly, mount and mistress were off,

disappearing into the thick fog.

“Like Queen Boadicea,” Reilly declared in wonder, not realizing he’d spoken aloud until Mrs. Murphy answered him.

“Aye,” she said, without the slightest enthusiasm. “Like you said, sir. Will you be separated from these trousers, sir, or have they grown a part of you, then? And if you’ll just hand over your boots, I’ll have Nancy stuff ’em, so’s the leather doesn’t lose its nice shape.”

Reilly sat himself down and without hesitation began pulling off his boots.

“Who is that woman?” he asked as he tugged. “She isn’t from around here, is she?”

“Miss Brenna, you mean?” Mrs. Murphy, seeing that he wasn’t making much progress with the boots, bent down and lifted one of his feet herself.

“London born, am I right?”

His boot came away with a violent sucking sound, and Mrs. Murphy staggered backward, a stream of seawater pouring out of the once-fine leather.

“Terribly sorry,” Reilly said, when he noticed the growing puddle on the floor. “I’ll pay for that, of course, if the water’s done any permanent damage. So? Is she from London?”

Mrs. Murphy had already sicced two or three of her girls on the puddle and did not appear to have heard Reilly’s question. She was instead working on the other boot.

“Hampstead,” Reilly said, peeling several notes from his wallet. “That’s where she’s from. Am I right?”

The second boot gave way, and the serving girls scrambled to clean up the water that spilled from it. Reilly wiggled his near-frozen toes in their sodden stockings.

“What’s a girl from Hampstead doing all the way up here?” he wondered. “Married some local bloke, did she?” But she’d hardly, he told himself, be called *Miss Brenna* if she were married. . . .

Not, of course, that he cared particularly. He wasn’t on this island to wonder about the marital status of women who bore the unfortunate name of Brenna . . . even uncommonly pretty ones who also happened to wear trousers and ride astride. *Especially* not one who seemed to have taken such a marked dislike of him. And was so exceptionally sure of herself, besides.

No. He was here to prove to his former fiancée that he was no dilettante, no dabbler in the medical arts. He had every intention of saving lives. Which was why he’d left behind his practice in London, where his patients had had a frustrating habit of not acquiring life-threatening illnesses. How could he prove the seriousness of his commitment to the medical profession if he could find no ills to cure?

And he *would* prove it, by God, even if it meant he had to endure a thousand Miss Brennass. . . .

“Lyming,” the owner of The Tortured Hare announced, quite unaccountably.

Reilly looked at her. “I beg your pardon?”

“Miss Brenna.” Mrs. Murphy nodded to him. “She’s from right here. Lyming, born and bred.”

Reilly was genuinely shocked. “*Lyming?*”

“Aye,” the woman said, clearly confused by his astonishment.

It took a few seconds for Reilly to digest this information. And when he had, more questions about the exasperating Miss Brenna slipped out quite against his will:

“How is that possible? She’s clearly well educated. She’s got some medical knowledge, that’s certain. But she can’t be the midwife, can she? Much too young for that. Why, she can’t be above twenty.”

Mrs. Murphy listened attentively to these questions but did not seem to feel that they required a reply. Instead, she responded with a question of her own. “Did you say you’ve got a trunk somewhere, Mr. Stanton? Maybe we could find a shirt for you in it. And a change of trousers.”

Her query was pointed enough that Reilly was momentarily distracted from his interrogation.

“I do have one, back on the ferry. A few bags, too. Medical equipment, and all of that. You know, you might want to have it all brought straight to the house.”

Mrs. Murphy looked at him, clearly puzzled. “House, sir?”

Reilly nodded. “Yes, that’s right. Lord Glendenning wrote that the position came with a living situation. A house, he said. Or was it a cottage? Yes, I think it was. Burn Cottage, he called it.”

The girls who’d been busy scrubbing the floor stopped suddenly, looking up with stunned expressions on their faces.

“Burn Cottage?” Mrs. Murphy peered at him rather closely, he thought. “Burn Cottage, he said you were to have? Are you quite certain?”

“Positive, actually,” Reilly said. “I distinctly remember wondering at the curious name and hoping it was because the place is close to a brook, and not because it has a tendency toward conflagration.”

He laughed, but either Burn Cottage periodically did just that, or the patrons of this particular alehouse were rather humorless, because he was the only one in the room who cracked a smile at his little joke. Well, Christine had always insisted his sense of humor was sometimes out of place, and

now, he supposed, was one of those times. The girls, having received a stern look from their employer, leaped to their feet and hurried away presumably to wait upon the other customers, business having returned to something like normal now that the ferryman had been revived. Stuben had even changed into a set of dry clothes, which were apparently kept there in anticipation of just such an event as today's.

Reilly said, "I say, I hope I haven't put my foot in it. By burn, you do mean brook, don't you?"

Mrs. Murphy smiled at him quite kindly. "Of course, sir. A lovely cottage it is, too. It's just that. . . ."

Reilly shook his head. "Come now, madam. Out with it. It's clear something's not right. Has the place been condemned, then? I heard about the cholera outbreak you all went through last summer. Was Burn Cottage quarantined, then?"

"No, no," Mrs. Murphy interrupted, hastily. "It isna that. It's just that . . . it's just that. . . ."

"Go on and tell 'im, Moira," one of the men shouted from the bar.

"It's just that—" Mrs. Murphy seemed to come to an internal decision and finished firmly, "It's just that it's much too late now to make a start for it, what with the fog being so thick. I'll send someone to fetch your things, and you'll stop the night here. Flora'll move in with Maeve. Will you not, then, Flora?"

Flora, whom Reilly noticed for the first time had an enormously swollen belly beneath her soiled apron, only rolled her eyes in response and started up a set of rickety-looking stairs in the back corner of the room.

"See here," Reilly said in some alarm. "There's no need for Miss—uh—Missus—er—Mistress Flora there to change beds. If the cottage is really too far, I'll just stay down here. It won't be the slightest trouble."

"Certainly not." Mrs. Murphy looked horrified at the very suggestion. "It's nothing for Flora to move."

"It's no' *nothing*," Reilly heard from Flora's direction, though the words were muttered beneath the girl's breath.

But not muttered low enough, since her employer heard them, as well, and went after the girl with the flat of her palm raised.

"That'll be enough out of you, miss," Mrs. Murphy declared, but before she had a chance to bring her hand down, Reilly had seized it and was holding it as if he and Mrs. Murphy were sweethearts—though it would have to be admitted that his grip was more restraining than it was affectionate.

“I say, madam,” Reilly said, with thoroughly false cheer. There was nothing, in his opinion, more foul than employers who beat their hirelings, except perhaps for husbands who beat their wives. “It wouldn’t be the least bit gentlemanly of me to put a young lady out of her room. I won’t hear of it—particularly a young lady in Mistress Flora’s delicate condition. Why, if my colleagues were to get wind of it, I’d be drummed out of the college. . . .”

This was a blatant lie, of course. There were more so-called distinguished members of the medical profession than Reilly could count who’d think nothing of driving a pregnant woman from her bed if it meant they might rest in comfort. There was a certain feeling of entitlement that seemed to be harbored by a large number of the men in Reilly’s line of work, an entitlement Reilly himself had never quite understood.

But Mrs. Murphy was hardly likely to have encountered many physicians before, and would doubtless be unaware of this curious fact.

“So, good madam,” Reilly went on, loosening his grip on her wrist a little, “if you’d be so kind as to have my things brought here, I’ll bed down comfortably on that settle over there and be done with it.”

Mrs. Murphy was not the only person in the room who stared up at him in something like astonishment. Maeve, Nancy, and even the *enceinte* Flora were all gazing at him as if he were some new, previously undiscovered species.

And perhaps to them, he was. The Tortured Hare’s regular clientele did not look the sort who might insist upon leaving a pregnant woman to her own bed, let alone step up to prevent her from sustaining a smack from her employer.

On the other hand, the women’s stares might have had nothing to do at all with Reilly’s gallantry but everything to do with the fact that when he’d reached out to seize Mrs. Murphy’s wrist, the blanket had slipped, leaving his naked chest once again open to their eager—and, judging from their expressions, highly appreciative—inspection.

Mrs. Murphy was the first to tear her gaze from Reilly’s bare torso.

“Well,” she said slowly. “I dunna know. Lord Glendenning is sure not to like it. . . .”

“Well, if Lord Glendenning doesn’t like it,” Reilly declared, “he can jolly well invite me to stay with him at Castle Glendenning, can’t he?”

Mrs. Murphy nodded, slowly. “Aye, he can at that.”

“Then it’s all settled.” Reilly released the plump lady’s arm, reached once more for the blanket and the meager protection it provided him against the somewhat lascivious stares of Maeve and her cohorts, then lifted the whisky glass that had sat, so long forgotten, by his elbow. He raised it in Flora’s direction. “To your health then, ladies—”

And with a glance at the ferryman, who seemed to be fast sinking into unconsciousness once again due to the number of drinks his mates had purchased for him, Reilly tilted his head back and emptied the contents of the glass into his mouth.

The whisky was delicious, strong enough to sting his eyes, but with a delightful smoky quality to it. The fiery liquid coursed down his throat, warming him in all the places he'd become convinced he'd never feel warm again. Pearson and Shelley, he thought to himself, would be paying two or three crowns a glass for stuff this good, and here he was drinking it for free, on account of having hauled a half-dead ferryman out of the drink.

And they'd urged him not to leave London!

It wasn't until several glasses of whisky later, after Reilly had finally changed into some dry clothes from his trunk, that he remembered one of the reasons Christine had broken off their engagement—one of the reasons she professed in her letter anyway, the same letter which currently hung, quite illegible, from a clothespin above the hearth—was his chronic drunkenness. The word *chronic* he thought was a bit much. After all, he imbibed no oftener than any other man he knew—rather less, in fact.

But Christine, sweet, pious Christine, who never missed church of a Sunday and belonged to more societies—temperance, missionary, abolition—than he could count on both hands, had apparently felt even his one or two whiskies a night was one or two too many.

Well, she was probably right. The more he drank—and there was an air of Bacchanalia about The Tortured Hare that Reilly found rather hard to resist—the more he seemed to forget the purpose of his coming to this deserted place.

And it was not to rub elbows with the local drunkards, as he appeared to be doing now, but to perform good works, to sacrifice himself for the sake of others, to prove to Miss Christine King once and for all that Reilly Stanton—*Lord* Reilly Stanton, if the truth be told, for wasn't he the eighth Marquis of Stillworth? For whatever *that* was worth—was a man of courage and conviction, who did not need to wave his title about like a flag to gain respect. And certainly not the drunken, indecisive wastrel she seemed to think him.

And by God, he'd prove it to her, if he had to save every bloody drunken ferryman on this accursed rock.

“Stanton.” Reilly's new best friend, Adam Mac-Adams, the eldest and most toothless of the fishermen, interrupted his meditations by wrapping an arm about his neck and slurring, “Lemme buy you another drink.”

“Oh, no, thank you,” Reilly said, politely. “I've had quite enough.”

“Jush one more drink. You saved my mate. My mate Stuben. Will you no' let me buy you a drink, to

thank you for savin' my mate Stuben?"

Reilly said, "I didn't save 'im. Your Miss Brenna saved 'im."

"Jush one more drink," MacAdams said. "Jush one."

Reilly couldn't remember ever having felt so warmly welcomed anywhere. Truly, his friends had had it all wrong. Highlanders were perfectly civil creatures after all. And the people of the Isle of Skye were the kindest, most genial Highlanders of all.

With tears in his eyes, Reilly said, "All right. One more. But only if I can make the toast."

"You go 'head," MacAdams said. "You make the toast."

Reilly held his glass high. "I'd like to make this toast to the most beautiful, gentle, sweet lady in all the land, the author of that letter there—" Everyone turned to look at the piece of pink stationery drying before the fire. "—the gracious, the lovely, the devout, the woman I intend to marry, if only she'll have me, the estimable Miss Christine King."

"To Mish King," the fishermen intoned.

They emptied their glasses, and then Reilly turned to Adam MacAdams and asked, "Now, just what is the problem with Burn Cottage?"

But he never did receive a reply. And that's because all of his new friends had nodded off well before he'd gotten the words entirely out of his mouth.

And Reilly, with a feeling of warm companionship, decided it would be ungentlemanly of him not to join them in their most hospitable slumber . . . despite what Christine would undoubtedly have thought of such a thing.



The castle was old, parts of it centuries old. Oddly, it was the more modern addition—circa 1650—that had begun to decay first. The walls had been crumbling for decades, and the foundation leaked. Every spring, the dungeons flooded. As prisoners were no longer kept in these subterranean cells, this was no great hardship, but the rush of water tended to drive the rats that made their home amid the wine casks in the cellar up into the residential sections of the castle.

This proved annoying to the serving staff, though it did not seem to bother the castle's owner particularly. Brenna was convinced that if a rat the size of a pony were crouching on Lord Glendenning's chest, it would not bother him overmuch, except in the event that the animal somehow prevented him from getting at his mug of ale.

Regarding the dozing earl dispassionately from the doorway, Brenna regretted that it was not yet spring.

Not, of course, that she relished the thought of encountering vermin in the dark and mildewy corridors of Castle Glendenning. Not at all. But she rather fancied that Iain MacLeod, nineteenth earl of Glendenning, would not be quite so sanguine about the rats in his household if she happened to drop one down his loathsome neck, which was no less than he deserved.

But as she had no rats handy, Brenna settled for crossing the room and giving the earl's feet, which he'd propped onto the hearth, a hearty kick.

Lord Glendenning's enormous booted feet came down onto the flagstone floor with a crash, waking the dogs that had been curled before the fire. The dogs immediately leaped up and began barking noisily as Lord Glendenning, floundering about for his sword in the folds of the cape with which he'd draped himself, cried, "Halt, thief! I've a weapon here, and I know how to use it!"

But when he finally brandished the fierce and ancient broadsword, the blade that had been in his family since, it was said, the days of Arthur, the person at whose throat he pointed it seemed wholly unimpressed. In fact, she reached up, and with thumb and index finger, pushed the point away.

"Could you not," Brenna inquired icily, "have at least mentioned to me that you were thinking about hiring a new physician?"

Lord Glendenning seemed to come more awake. He blinked his darkly lashed, pale blue eyes—

eyes that, Brenna knew, had caused more feminine hearts to flutter than she could count on all her fingers and toes together—and asked, “Brenna? Is that you, then?”

“Of course it’s me.” She ducked beneath the blade he still held aloft, and went to stretch her fingers, frozen from the ride, out before the fire. The dogs, recognizing a friend, fell upon her, scrambling to thrust a muzzle beneath her hands.

“Down,” Lord Glendenning bellowed at the animals, but they paid no more heed to him than usual and did not stop jumping up to lick the visitor’s face until she sat down upon the hearth with her back to the fire and said in a commanding voice, “No,” and then, “Sit,” which they all did, and promptly, too.

“What are you doing here?” Lord Glendenning asked, as he resheathed the sword. “Have you changed your mind?” He reached up to sweep some of his long, ink-black hair from his face and scrutinized her expression closely in the light from the dying fire. “You have, by God. You’ve finally come to your senses. Well, this calls for a celebration. Raonull!” The earl threw back his head and bayed louder than any of his dogs ever had. “Raonull! Wake up and bring some wine!”

“Stop that shouting,” Brenna said, as she quite unconsciously began working a burr from the coat of the dog nearest her. The hound rolled his eyes appreciatively at this attention and rested his heavy head in her lap. “Really, have you lost all the sense that God gave you? I haven’t changed my mind. I want to know what you think you’re about, going ahead and hiring a physician without so much as a word to anyone.”

Lord Glendenning looked a bit disconcerted. “Hiring a . . .” He blinked a few times. “Oh. You found out about that, did you?”

“Found out about it?” Brenna shook her head wonderingly at him. “I should say so. The fellow walked into Moira’s half an hour ago. Really, my lord. How *could* you? The very least you could have done was mention—”

“Half an hour ago?” Glendenning sank back down onto the deep tapestry chair where he’d been dozing a few moments before. He looked perplexed. “But he’s not due till Wednesday.”

Brenna rolled her eyes. “It *is* Wednesday, my lord,” she said.

“Oh.”

Iain MacLeod looked down at his large, callused hands, as if they might hold an excuse which would help him out of this awkward predicament. Brenna regarded him calmly. Although the Earl of Glendenning rarely did anything that pleased her, she was perfectly cognizant of the fact that this was not because he wished personally to offend her, but only because he quite simply did not know any better. In fact, he sometimes went very much out of his way in his attempts to win her favor. The fact that these attempts rarely succeeded was not necessarily the earl’s fault.

At least, that's what Brenna told herself, whenever she felt the urge, like now, to wrap her hands around his massive neck and squeeze.

"You could," Brenna chided him gently, stroking one of the dog's ears, "have told me, you know."

Lord Glendenning scowled. He was a handsome man. Truth be told, he was the handsomest man Brenna had ever seen. At least he had been. Now that Brenna had met Reilly Stanton, she found she could not be absolutely sure on that account.

She was perfectly sure, however, that even a scowl became Lord Glendenning . . . a fact of which he was only too aware. The earl was perfectly sensible of his good looks—something Brenna was not at all certain could be said of Dr. Stanton—and of the sometimes devastating effect those looks had on impressionable young women, and even some older ones, as well. He suffered no compunction in using those looks to his advantage whenever possible.

But Brenna knew only too well that the earl's looks were deceiving. Angelic he might seem to the eye, but beneath that heavenly facade, she was well aware, lurked a devilish heart. She was therefore unmoved by his scowl. In fact, she scowled right back at him.

"That isn't really fighting fair, now, is it?" She frowned to let him know she wasn't the least bit amused. "At the very least, you could have warned me."

Glendenning stuck out his chin. It was clefted, his jaw square and currently blue with the shadow of a day-old beard.

"I *meant* to tell you," he said truculently. "Only I . . . well, I forgot."

"Oh, I see." Brenna nodded. "You *forgot*. Of course, how stupid of me. Here I was thinking you'd done it on purpose to catch me off my guard and leave me vulnerable to your . . . suggestions."

"Well, dammit, Brenna!" The earl pushed himself up out of the chair and set to pacing the length of the room, which, having once been the great hall of the castle, was quite a long one. Old and tattered banners bearing the crest of his particular branch of the MacLeod family—two lions wrestling on a field of green—still hung from the rafters of its twenty-foot ceiling. "What do you expect me to do, eh?"

"I expect you to act like a man," Brenna said. "And not a spoiled little child."

"How am I acting like a spoiled child?" the earl demanded, turning toward her so quickly that the long cape he wore swirled out behind him like a storm cloud. "I am acting in the best interests of my people—"

"By hiring a physician you found by advertising in the London *Times*?" Brenna's voice was filled with scorn. "Do you have any idea if this man is even qualified for the position? For all you know, he could be some charlatan—"

“He’s no charlatan,” the earl snapped. “He sent me half a dozen letters of recommendation, all of which were exemplary. He went to Oxford, for God’s sake, Brenna. He’s a Fellow of the Royal University—”

“College,” Brenna corrected him. The earl shrugged. “He’s been practicing in London for over a year now. Some of his patients are peers. One of ’em’s even a viscountess—”

“Oh, and God knows any man with a successful London medical practice, with genteel and wealthy patients, would jump at the chance to throw it all away and come out here to work for a pittance in the most desolate and plague-infested area in all of Europe.”

Glendenning glared at her. He was, unfortunately, maddeningly immune to sarcasm. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that you’ve been had. If you’d only consulted with me—”

“What makes you think I’ve been had?” the earl demanded. “What’s wrong with the bloke, then?”

Brenna blinked at him. He was so simple, really. As naive as a child about some things.

But so very much a man about others.

“Well, nothing’s *wrong* with him,” she said. “Not the way you mean.”

“No?” Glendenning sneered. “The way you’re carrying on, I’d have expected him to be a hunchback, at the very least.”

“He isn’t,” Brenna said, “a hunchback.”

Far from it, actually. Dr. Stanton appeared, from her brief encounter with him, to be quite a vigorous young man. Very vigorous indeed . . . as she was only too capable of affirming. It wasn’t often that Brenna walked into The Tortured Hare and found herself staring at an Apollo, but that was certainly what had happened this evening.

Worse yet, a shirtless Apollo, impossibly broad shouldered, with a flat stomach, sinewy muscles, and satiny skin, glowing bronze in the firelight. Brenna had been hard pressed to tear her gaze from this vision, particularly when a closer inspection had revealed a thick forest of silky-looking dark hair that swirled across the doctor’s chest where it was broadest, then narrowed to a mere ribbon along what appeared to be a rock-hard stomach before disappearing provocatively into the waistband of his breeches.

Even harder to ignore was the fact that the doctor was so tall—fully as tall as the only man on Skye who’d ever towered over Brenna, besides her own father: none other than the infamous Lord Glendenning himself. But Dr. Stanton wasn’t just as tall as the earl. Oh, no. He was also quite

obviously just as strong, as the muscles in his arms (which had bunched up when Dr. Stanton folded them over that wide, inviting chest) attested. What a physician was doing with muscles like that, Brenna could not begin to guess, but it was certainly no mystery as to how this particular one had managed to drag Stuben single-handedly from the sea—a job that normally took four men.

Brenna had found it exceedingly difficult not to let her admiration show—though she could not say the same of the tavern’s staff, whom she felt had behaved quite disgracefully in front of the newcomer . . . especially Maeve, who’d all but panted every time she looked at him. Not that Brenna could blame her, particularly. Dr. Stanton, with that lean, muscular body, strong, sturdy shoulders, laughing dark eyes, and quick smile, was all that was amiable.

So what, in God’s name, was he doing on Skye?

“He’s clearly in some kind of trouble,” Brenna said, “back in London.”

“Trouble?” Glendenning threw her a startled look over his shoulder as he paced toward a sideboard, where he kept his whisky decanter. “What are you talking about? What kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know,” Brenna said. “But no intelligent man, which Dr. Stanton quite clearly is, would willingly come *here* to start a practice. Not when he already has a lucrative one in London. It would be sheer madness. So I can only presume he’s done something horrible and that they’ve taken away his license. It’s the only explanation.”

“They’ve done no such thing,” Glendenning informed her indignantly, as he poured out two glasses. “I wrote to his college myself, and they assured me he was not only an excellent candidate for the position, but that they quite questioned his judgment in agreeing to take it.”

“Aha!” Brenna cried, with enough energy to startle the dogs. “That’s it, then. He’s not sound in the head.”

Glendenning, handing her one of the whiskies, looked worried again. “Did he seem unsound?”

“Well . . . no.” He had, unfortunately, seemed quite lucid. She frowned and set the whisky aside, well out of reach of the dogs. Then she brightened. “He did leap into the bay after Stuben, though.”

The earl laughed. It was not a very kindly laugh. It was more triumphant than anything else.

“Well, there you go, then,” Glendenning declared, with relish. “That cinches it. He’s one of *those*.”

“One of what?” Brenna glanced at him curiously.

“He wasna talking up religion over there at Moira’s, was he?”

“Religion? Certainly not. Whatever are you *talking* about?”

“Stanton!” Glendenning shouted the name toward the roofbeams above. “Who else? I think, Brenna,

you're going to have to admit that the reason the fellow's come here is that he wants to do good, to help the less fortunate, and all that rot. You know the type. A zealot. A champion for good causes. London's crawling with 'em."

Brenna snorted. "Oh, certainly. Highly skilled and well-paid physicians are notorious, after all, for packing up and leaving the city in which they've achieved all their status, to establish low-paying practices in tiny coastal villages in the Hebrides. You forget, my lord." She shook her head. "I've lived in London. I know what these men are like. These are the same men, you will recall, who drummed my own father out of the medical practice. There isn't a one of them who would sacrifice his comfortable living for—" She glanced around the room with a slightly curled lip. "—well, *this*."

"*This*," Glendenning said, looking hurt, "happens to be quite the oldest castle on Skye, I'll have you know. Well, that's still standing, anyway."

"I don't doubt it," Brenna assured the earl.

Satisfied that she had not, as he'd evidently feared, been maligning his homestead, the earl tipped his whisky glass in her direction.

"You can cast all the aspersions you want on the man, Brenna," Glendenning said, "but he said he'd come, and now that he's here I'm not sending him back. He's staying."

"Well," Brenna said, briskly. "That's the question, then, isn't it? *Where* is he staying?"

Glendenning stopped grinning suddenly and set the whisky glass down with a thump. "You know very well where, Brenna," he said in a deep, even voice.

She nodded, feeling oddly deflated. Well, there it was. He had as good as said it. It was, of course, everything she'd feared, but she'd never imagined he'd really go through with it. She wouldn't have thought it of him. He was, for all his bluster, a fairly simple man, not seemingly capable of deviousness or subterfuge.

Or at least, that's what she'd thought up until now.

"Well," she said. "That changes things a bit, then, doesn't it?"

Glendenning looked uneasy but determined.

"It doesna change a thing," he said, coming to a standstill a few feet away from her and crossing his brawny arms over his chest. "You had to have known I was going to get my way in the end, Brenna."

"You might," she admitted, with a shrug. "But it will be over my dead body."

He gritted his teeth, the flexing of the muscles in his shadowed jaw visible in the firelight.

"Now, Brenna," he said. "Be reasonable."

“I *have* been reasonable,” she said. “But this is despicable, even for you.”

He frowned. “See here,” the earl said in wounded tones. “I think I’ve been quite patient, under the circumstances. More patient than any other bloke would be, Brenna. I didna mean for you to find out this way—by running into the blighter down at Moira’s—but I canna say as I’m sorry I did it. It isna right, Brenna.”

“No, by God, it isn’t, and don’t think I shan’t—”

“Not what *I’ve* done.” Glendenning thrust a finger at himself. “*I* am perfectly in the right. *You’re* the one who’s got things all mixed up.”

“*Me?*” Brenna shot up to her feet, causing the dogs, who’d been lulled back to sleep by her gentle stroking, no small amount of alarm. “*I’ve* got things mixed up? Oh, that’s rich. You know I’ve offered to pay you rent a thousand times. If you’d just given me some notice, I’d have—”

“You’re the one who’s confused, Brenna. I mean, look at you! You’re wearing trousers, for God’s sake.”

“That’s it, then?” she demanded, stepping over one of the hounds until she stood directly in front of him, her chin level with his breastbone. “No discussion? No negotiation?”

He looked a little uneasy, and she realized it was probably due to her close proximity. Still, she couldn’t back down.

“No discussions,” the earl said. “There’ve been enough discussions. You know where I stand. And now you know that I’ve won. I’m sorry I had to do it this way, but you didna leave me much choice. Now, when can I expect you?”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. “You must be joking.”

“I’m not.” He was trying very hard, she could tell, to maintain a dignified demeanor. “I am perfectly serious.”

“You might be serious, but you aren’t being smart. I do have other options, you know.”

He looked alarmed. “*Options? What options?*”

“I could leave Skye.”

To his credit, he didn’t panic. Instead, he said with admirable calm, “You could. But, you’ve got to admit, Brenna, anywhere else but Skye, you wouldna exactly . . .”

“Wouldn’t exactly what?”

“Well. Fit in.”

She glared up at him. Really, but he was the most insufferable man! Even if he was at least a little right.

“Oh, wouldn’t I?” she demanded. “You think just because I choose to wear trousers, I don’t know how to put on a skirt? Well, I do know how, my lord, and I’m telling you right now that if you don’t call off this ridiculous little scheme of yours, I am going to put on a skirt, and march right off this miserable island—”

This last speech did not get her the desired response. Because instead of meekly backing down, Lord Glendenning reached out, seized both of her shoulders in his hard, callused fingers, and dragged her peremptorily toward him.

“Now you listen to me,” he said, giving her a shake that was hard enough to send her long red hair flipping forward into her face and then back again. “You’re no’ going anywhere, understand?”

The earl’s blue eyes did not look at all attractive just then, as they’d gone cold as the ice that was currently coating the burn.

“If you so much as think about heading for the ferry, I’ll find out about it,” the earl assured her. “You think I willna? This is a small village, and I am, after all, its lord. I’ll drag you back myself if I have to.”

Brenna, her heart beginning to slam rather hard against her rib cage, swallowed and thought, *Now you’ve done it, Brenna. You always have to go just a little too far.*

Still, her voice was admirably calm as she said, “Really, my lord. Must you behave so brutishly? I like you better when you exercise more restraint.”

“You drive me to it,” he said, accusingly. “You know you do, Brenna. You always have.”

Then he appeared to think that a more physical expression of his ardor would perhaps be more persuasive than mere words. Accordingly, he brought Brenna up hard against his chest, and lowered his mouth across hers, apparently believing that in this manner he might transmit some of his passion to her.

But the effect was rather wasted on Brenna, who was truly growing frightened by this unbridled display of emotion.

And so she did the only thing she reasonably could under the circumstances, which was to club Lord Glendenning rather hard upon the ear with the side of her fist.

And then, when he brought his mouth away from hers in surprise, she brought that same fist, with considerable force, to his right eye.

The earl cried out and released her at once, staggering away and clutching his face.

“For God’s sake, Brenna,” he bellowed. “What did you have to go and do that for?”

Brenna had sprung as quickly as she could out of his reach, and now she stood on the far side of the room, the dogs gathered round her, whining nervously.

“You know perfectly well why,” she said, not caring anymore that her voice was trembling. “If you’re going to act like a brute, you’ll be treated like one.”

“Still,” the earl said dejectedly. “You didna have to hit me so hard.”

Brenna said, “Well, you didn’t have to grab me like that.”

“I know it. It’s only just—” The earl sank wearily back into his chair and reached for his whisky glass. “—that I’m so damned in love with you.”

“You aren’t,” Brenna said. She felt something akin to a pang of sympathy for him. Really, but he was nothing but a great child. “You only think you are. You’re confusing love with lust again.”

“I’m no’,” Lord Glendenning declared mulishly. “You’re always sayin’ that, but it isna true.”

Brenna sighed. It really was useless, arguing with him when he was in such a mood as this. She ought to have left straight away, as soon as she’d recognized the signs. Still, she couldn’t help one last try:

“Are you going to send Dr. Stanton back to London,” she asked, “or aren’t you?”

“I’m no’,” the earl said, sullenly. “What do you think of that?”

But he never found out what she thought of that because no sooner were the words out of his mouth than Brenna turned around and left the castle, wishing rather heartily that the spring floods would come early, and that Lord Glendenning might, with luck, be eaten alive by rats in his odious sleep.



“**D**r. Stanton?”

Reilly winced, but did not open his eyes or lift his head.

“Dr. Stanton? Are you all right?”

Carefully, Reilly opened one eye, then hastily closed it again. He was still dreaming, of course. Obviously, he and Pearson and Shelley had imbibed a little too much the night before, and now he was suffering for it. He was having one of those hideous dreams about the romantic poets, brought on no doubt by Christine’s having dragged him to yet another godawfully boring poetry reading. . . .

“Dr. Stanton? I saw you open your eyes. I know you’re no’ asleep.”

There was a loud creaking noise beside him, like someone very large lowering himself into a chair that wasn’t quite sturdy enough to hold his weight. “Come now. Join me in a spot of breakfast.”

With a sigh, Reilly opened his eyes. And instantly wished he hadn’t.

No, he wasn’t dreaming. Lord Byron was sitting next to him.

Well, all right, not Byron, since he’d died twenty years or so earlier, but someone who certainly looked like Lord Byron . . . or rather, who made something of an effort to emulate him. The man seated beside Reilly was broad shouldered and narrow hipped, with not, as far as Reilly could tell, a hint of fat on him. No, he was all muscle and, it appeared, hair. He had a good deal of hair, all of it very dark, most of it tumbling down from a point in the center of his forehead in shoulder-length waves, but quite a lot of it coating his forearms where he’d pushed up the flowing sleeves of his white shirt, and peeping out the open collar of that same shirt, as the man wore no cravat.

His face was clean shaven, however—except where razor stubble already appeared on his lean and chiseled face. And since it seemed to be very early in the morning indeed—closer, Reilly supposed, to night than to day—this was something at which to be wondered. The man was obviously quite virile.

Except, of course, for the skirt he wore.

Well, all right. It wasn't a skirt. It was a kilt. And the amount of hair springing from the bare knees beneath its hem was really quite extraordinary.

“Who,” Reilly managed to croak, with his whisky-furred tongue, “are you?”

“Glendenning,” the man said. His voice was so deep, it seemed to reverberate inside Reilly's skull, like thunder. It was not a pleasant sensation, particularly considering the fragile state of Reilly's skull at that particular moment. “Iain MacLeod, Earl of Glendenning. I came as soon as I could. Bloody fog held me off. But you seem to have entertained yourself fairly well in the meantime.”

Blairily, Reilly looked around him. Adam MacAdams and his cronies were slumped against the bar in various stages of unconsciousness. Only the newly resurrected Stuben seemed to have found a comfortable place to sleep, stretched out upon the very bed Mrs. Murphy had made for Reilly, upon the padded seat of the settle.

“What,” Reilly began, then winced, and lowered his voice. “What time is it?”

“Coming on six. Looks like you and these gents had yourselves a merry time together.”

Reilly looked at his snoring drinking partners. Strangely, they had seemed a good deal less elderly—and ugly—in the night than they did in the cold light of day.

“I suppose we did,” Reilly admitted reluctantly, since, truth be told, he could not remember precisely what kind of time he'd had. “I just don't understand why Mrs. Murphy didn't throw them all out at closing time.”

“Closing time?” Lord Glendenning grinned. Reilly, startled by both the size and sheer number of his teeth, leaned back a bit on his stool, reminded, unaccountably, of a wolf. “There's no such thing, not on Skye. Moira lets 'em drink till they pass out, most nights. Half of 'em havena been home in a month, I'll wager.”

Reilly grimaced. That explained a lot about the smell of the place.

“Not,” Glendenning continued, “that they're missed overly much. Some of their wives are surprisingly bonny lasses.” He winked broadly at Reilly. “Many a bed I've warmed while these blokes have been sittin' at this bar, drinkin' themselves senseless.”

Horried not at Lord Glendenning's casual admittance of adultery, but at the fact that he would consider sleeping with the wives of these elderly men, Reilly stared. Things were obviously a good deal worse on Skye than he'd been led to believe.

Noticing the stare, Glendenning grinned and said, “I know what you're thinking, but you're wrong. See old MacAdams, there?”

Reilly nodded.

“He’s got a wife not a day over thirty. And why not? He himself isna much older’n thirty-five.”

Reilly’s jaw dropped. “But—my God, *I’m* thirty, and I—”

“It’s the sea,” Glendenning said with a shrug. “All those hours out in the open, in all kinds of weather, with the wind beating down on them and the salt spraying up at them. . . . It ages a man. Ages him before his time.”

Reilly shook his head. “I’d never have thought it. Not in a million years.”

“Of course no’. Why would you?” Glendenning glanced around the room. “None of the lasses up yet, then? Thought we might have a chance of talking over breakfast.”

Reilly glanced around. “I guess not. But that’s all right. I’m not really all that—”

“Well, I am.” Glendenning rose, all of his joints popping in protest and stalked toward the back stairway. “Let me see if I canna persuade one of them to fry us up some eggs. I can be very *persuasive* when I want to.” He tossed this last back over his shoulder, with another wink, just before he disappeared up the stairs.

Reilly watched him go without expression. As soon as the earl was out of sight, he leaped up and snatched Christine’s letter from where it rested by the now-cold hearth. What had he been thinking, letting them hang this out to dry as if it had been a receipt or letter of recommendation? It wasn’t the sort of thing a man flaunted, a letter from his fiancée, requesting to be released from their engagement.

Thank God the seawater had wiped away most of Christine’s writing. Not that it mattered. He had memorized the text long ago. Still, there was no need to share it with these people, these people with whom he was going to be expected to maintain a professional relationship.

Going to his trunk, which Mrs. Murphy had had rescued from Stuben’s boat and placed beneath the bar, Reilly lifted the lid, slipped the letter inside and pulled out his journal, along with ink and a rather untidy pen. He sat back down, opened the journal, scanned the last entry, then wrote:

February fifteenth, eighteen hundred and forty-seven

Drank much too much last night and am filled with self-loathing and vomit today. Christine is right: I am a drunken wastrel. Must prove her wrong, but how? Aside from giving up drink, of course.

Failed to save a man’s life last night. Was shown up in front of entire village by Amazon in trousers. Name of Brenna, but not like any Brenna I’ve ever known.

He paused, wondering precisely how to describe this woman who'd been so disturbingly attractive and yet so unapologetically rude. He decided that, considering his headache, such an endeavor was entirely beyond him at the moment. He focused his attention on Iain MacLeod instead.

Lord Glendenning frighteningly like Byron. Afraid to look at his feet in case one clubbed.

No one has so much as mentioned the word haggis yet. Pearson and Shelley wrong once again.

Appears to be some trouble about the cottage.

He looked up, having become aware of some interesting noises from overhead. He put the book away and was sitting at the bar, wondering if coffee would do his throbbing head any good, when the earl returned, a giggling Flora behind him, still struggling to fasten her dress. Reilly realized with a startling burst of clarity that he was about to dine with the man responsible for the serving girl's current condition, and couldn't help wondering how many bastards Lord Glendenning had sired among the staff of The Tortured Hare.

"Miss Flora here has agreed to preparing us a repast, doctor," the earl said, in his rumbling voice. "What say you and I retire to this table here, to await what she promises to be a breakfast fit for a king?"

The thought of eating anything made Reilly feel a bit nauseous, but he joined Glendenning at the nearby table, after carefully stepping over the unconscious form of one of his new friends, whose name escaped him at that particular moment.

"Now," Lord Glendenning said, raising a glass of ale Flora had poured for him. "First things first. A toast, Dr. Stanton. To your health. Welcome to Skye."

Reilly looked queasily down at his own beer. A light froth coated the top of the glass. "Right," he said. "To Skye."

And he gulped down the thick, yeasty brew.

A wave of nausea engulfed him. For a moment, he was certain he was going to vomit all over himself, the table, and Lord Glendenning. That, he thought to himself, certainly ought to impress his new employer.

And then, just as suddenly, he felt better. Just like that. The beer seemed to settle his stomach, and the tightness in his head disappeared.

His relief must have shown on his face since the earl laughed and said, "I knew that'd do the trick. Hair of the dog. Never fails."

Reilly looked down at the beer wonderingly. "I can't believe it. Mrs. Murphy ought to patent this

and sell it as a health tonic. The Americans would snap it up for certain.”

Glendenning held a finger to his lips. “Are you daft, man? She’d leave us, and then where would we go when we wanted a nip of an evening?”

“Right.” Reilly nodded at the sagacity of this. “Right, of course.”

“Now, then.” Glendenning reached down and scratched himself in an area that, had he not been wearing a kilt, would not have been nearly so easily accessible. “After breakfast, we’ll walk over and take a look at the dispensary. You’ll understand it’s been shut up since the last surgeon—”

“Physician,” Reilly said.

Glendenning eyed him. “Beg your pardon?”

“Physician.” Reilly took a few more gulps of beer. He was feeling better and better. Why, it shouldn’t take any time at all to win Christine back. All he had to do was cure a few people of cholera and prove how important this physician business was to him—far more important, despite what Christine might have thought, than being the Marquis of Stillworth—and she’d be begging to marry him. He’d be home by next Christmas, for certain. “You advertised for a physician, not a surgeon.”

“Right.” Glendenning pushed some of his monstrously long hair from his face. Christine, Reilly supposed, would undoubtedly consider the earl devastatingly handsome—maybe any woman would. But to Reilly, he was merely a mess, with his great hairy knees bumping against his beneath the table, and his incessant scratching. Not, Reilly imagined, that he himself looked such a picture. He could feel his own day’s growth of beard prickling his face, and his hair surely wasn’t staying in the leather cord with which he’d tied it back. But still, he imagined he looked rather better than Glendenning, who seemed to fancy himself the brooding hero out of a novel. Reilly wouldn’t be a bit surprised if it turned out the man rode a coal-black stallion.

“Right, physician,” the earl muttered. “Which is why you’d be Dr. Stanton and not Mr. Stanton, correct?”

Reilly nodded.

“You’ll pardon everyone if they make the mistake of calling you mister at first. Our last man didn’t care overmuch, so we mostly called him mister. Mr. Donnegan, he was.”

Reilly nodded again. “I understand that Mr. Donnegan is no longer with us.”

“Aye. . . .”

“Cholera, I heard it was,” Reilly said.

Glendenning eyed him, a curious expression on his face. “Aye, ’twas the cholera, all right. But no’ the way you’re thinking—”

“Oh, never fear,” Reilly interrupted. “I don’t hold my own life in any sort of great regard. You’ll find I won’t be the least squeamish about treating cholera patients.”

In fact, Reilly had to make an effort not to sound as gleeful as he felt. The thought of battling a cholera epidemic, while it might have struck foreboding in the heart of any other physician, caused only excitement in the heart of Dr. Stanton. Cholera was, after all, the kind of truly alarming, truly devastating disease that just might impress even the highly critical Miss King—and if he died from his efforts to save a few poor souls, well, all the more self sacrificing he’d seem in her eyes.

Fortunately Flora arrived at the side of their table, struggling with a tray piled high with an alarming amount of food, and Lord Glendenning was spared from having to make a reply to Reilly’s extraordinary declaration.

“Ah,” the earl said, carefully tucking a napkin over the front of his white shirt. “Thank you, my love.”

Reilly jumped up and took the heavy tray from the pregnant girl, only aware that he’d become the recipient of some rather odd looks from both maid and master after he’d sat down again.

“Thank you, sir,” Flora said, in an astonished voice. Splotches of color appeared in each of her cheeks as she stared at Reilly.

“Er, yes,” Lord Glendenning said, looking a bit annoyed at Flora’s blush. “Thank you, doctor. I’d have helped her, of course, but I, er, injured my thumb the other day—”

“You’ll have to let me have a look at it,” Reilly said, scooping eggs onto his plate.

“Well, it’s all right now,” the earl said. “Just a bit tender.”

“Of course,” Reilly said, in his most soothing voice. Then, thinking it was perhaps a bit early in their relationship to begin mocking his employer, he changed the subject. “About the cottage, my lord —”

“Ah, yes.” Lord Glendenning shoveled a large pile of eggs into his mouth and proceeded to speak as if they weren’t there, sending bits of egg spraying all about the room. “Burn Cottage. Slight difficulty with it, at the moment—”

“Really?” Reilly watched with interest as a piece of egg the earl had spat made a slow descent down the side of the wall. “I should let you know I’m not in the least bit fussy about my quarters. So long as there’s a roof over my head, I’m fine. If the place is untidy—”

“Oh, it’s not that,” the earl assured him. “No, it’s just that I havena quite got rid of the current

tenant.”

Reilly raised his eyebrows. “Current tenant, my lord?”

“Yes. Stubborn as a goat, that one. See this here?” He jerked a finger toward a faint purple mouse beneath his right eye. “She hit me! Punched me square in the face last night, without so much as a how-do-you-do!”

Reilly laid down his fork and thought that he should very much like to punch the earl square in the face himself.

“It was my understanding,” Reilly said, in a voice that was every bit as cold as the frigid water into which he’d so cavalierly leaped the day before, “that the cottage came with the living of village physician.”

“Right,” the earl said, slurping his beer. “That’s right.”

“Then if the former physician is no longer with us—” Reilly’s voice would have frozen melted butter. “—how is it that there is someone living in the physician’s cottage?”

“Och.” The earl shrugged his massive shoulders. “It’s his daughter.”

“Are you telling me—” Reilly was hoping, quite fervently, that he’d heard the man wrong. “—that you plan on turning an orphan out into the cold, sir?”

“Orphan?” Glendenning snickered. “Orphan my arse.”

Reilly thought he really would have liked to give the earl a matching mouse beneath his left eye. He didn’t think it would be so difficult, either. The two men appeared to be of equal height and weight. Reilly had bested far bigger men at college.

And none of them had been wearing a skirt.

“Listen here, Glendenning,” he said, tossing down his napkin in disgust. “I won’t stand for it, do you hear? You’re not turning some innocent girl out into the snow on account of me. If I have to pay for alternate accommodations myself, I’ll do it, by God—what in the hell is so funny?”

“You,” the earl replied between guffaws. “I never met anyone like you before, Stanton. I thought men like you died with the Round Table!”

Reilly eyed him angrily. “Why? Because I’ve got a problem with wealthy landowners rendering piteous orphans homeless in order to make way for a personal physician to look after their tender thumbs?”

Now it was Glendenning’s turn to throw down his napkin. “See here,” he said. “I dunna think I care for your tone, Stanton. Firstly, I injured my thumb quite badly—nearly tore the nail off. See?”

Reilly stared dispassionately at the appendage the earl thrust before his face.

“And secondly, I did not hire you to be my personal physician. It’s true that after last summer, I’m a bit wary of more . . . unpleasantness. But I’ve brought you here to look after the villagers as much as myself. And thirdly, regarding this piteous orphan you’re so intent on defending, I’ll have you know that one, she’s no orphan, and two, she’s nearly twenty and not, as you seem to fancy, some wee little waif. She’s perfectly capable of taking care of herself, as this cursed bruise under my eye surely attests.”

Reilly said, tonelessly, “You ought to put a slab of meat on that eye. Bring down the swelling. And soak that thumb in warm water.”

Glendenning looked down at the injured digit in surprise. “Really?”

“Yes. I’ll give you some powders to add to the water. You should keep it bandaged, as well. Now what do you mean, she isn’t an orphan? I thought you said Mr. Donnegal was dead.”

Glendenning shook his head, his raven locks swaying.

“I never said that. Donnegal’s alive and well. “

“Alive and—” Reilly broke off and stared at his employer. “I thought you said he was taken in last summer’s cholera outbreak.”

“He was, in a way,” Glendenning said with a shrug. “Packed up his wife—entire brood, in fact—and shipped off to India. To research the . . . what was it now? Oh, right. The *origins* of the Asiatic cholera.”

“Good God,” Reilly burst out. “And left his daughter behind?”

Glendenning rolled his eyes. “There you go again. No, he did not leave his daughter behind. Left her in keeping with his brother in London. And she, willful and ungrateful lass that she is, turned around and came right back to Skye at the very first opportunity she got to escape.”

Reilly gaped at him. “Came *back*? Came *back* to Skye? *Why*?”

“How should I know? She won’t tell me.” The earl leaned forward. “But there’s one thing I do know: she’ll have to clear out of that cottage now. Now that you’re here, I mean.”

Reilly stared at the earl. One of the reasons he had not minded leaving London so much was that he had thought he’d be leaving behind men like the earl . . . members of the privileged upper class, who thought so much of themselves and so little for the people for whom they were supposed to be responsible. These were the men who’d viewed Reilly’s ambition to be a physician with incredulity and even contempt. Why, they’d asked him, would a man born to be a marquis bother getting an

education, let alone a profession? A second son, they could see, but Reilly was his father's first born.

Reilly's assertions that medical science and the medical profession as a whole fascinated him had fallen upon deaf ears. His determination to attain his physician's license had become the joke of his set, referred to—within his hearing, no less—as “Stillworth's Folly.” And when he'd achieved his goal and insisted upon being called doctor by his patients, instead of Lord Stillworth, even Christine had objected. Surely the fact that Reilly was a marquis outweighed his physician status.

But to Reilly, the title he'd attained through his own hard work and determination was infinitely more precious than the one he'd earned because his father had died from a broken neck after a fall from his favorite horse.

But even as far away as the Isle of Skye, it seemed, Reilly could not escape the hypocrisy and selfishness of the class he'd grown ashamed to admit he'd been born into.

“I won't have it.” Reilly threw down the not-very-clean napkin Flora had given him and glared at the earl. “I refuse to allow you to render this defenseless woman homeless on my account—”

Glendenning grinned at him. “Put down your sword, Lancelot. Or is it Galahad? I've a very good reason for wanting the lady in question out of Burn Cottage.”

“Other than to make way for me, you mean?” Reilly eyed him distrustfully. “And what reason would that be?”

“Simple.” The earl turned back to the food on his plate. “I want her to come and live with me. And now,” he added with a shrug, “she has to.”



Reilly stood up so fast his chair fell back with a clatter, causing more than one of his drinking companions from the night before to stir and groan.

Reilly didn't care. He leaned forward until he'd placed a fist on either side of the earl's plate, then hissed into his face, "You bastard. If I had my pistol with me right now, I'd blow a hole through that fatuous face of yours so big I'd be able to see the ocean through it."

Glendenning looked taken aback, but not enough to stop chewing. "Calm down, Stanton," he said. "I mean to marry her."

Reilly blinked. "*What?*"

"Certainly I do. What do you think, I have to take my mistresses by force?"

Reilly wanted to say, Well, you certainly look as if you do, but he rather fancied that was the point of Glendenning's ridiculous ensemble, and since he didn't want to encourage the fellow, he said instead, "Well, you don't seem to mind sleeping with your friends' wives, so why should I put anything else past you?"

Glendenning's face darkened. "They're no' my *friends*," he said emphatically, clearly more insulted by the implication that he might socialize with fishermen than that he was an adulterer. "Are you jesting? They're my people. There's a difference, you know. Feudal rights, and all of that."

Reilly shook his head incredulously. "Feudal rights?" he repeated. This was far worse than anything he'd ever heard from his set back in London—worse even than anything he'd encountered at Oxford.

"Yes." Glendenning waved his butter knife. "You know. The lord of the manor gets the privilege of deflowering all the village virgins, and whatnot. Not that I do—well, not *that* way. I mean, by demanding it as my right. They just all seem to want to. Let me deflower them, I mean. I canna say I know why."

Reilly did. He'd gotten a good look at the competition. What woman in her right mind would prefer an Adam MacAdams over an Iain MacLeod? The bloke was big as a house and handsome, too, if you liked the sort, which, for reasons Reilly would never understand, women clearly did.

And it didn't hurt, Reilly supposed, that Glendenning was undoubtedly the richest eligible bachelor for miles.

"What about Miss Donnegal, then?" Reilly demanded. "If the island ladies are so eager to throw themselves into your bed, why do you have to force Miss Donnegal from her home and into yours? Shouldn't she be swooning at your feet like Flora back there?" He nodded toward the kitchens, into which Flora had disappeared.

Glendenning looked thoughtful. Still, he did not stop chewing. "She *should* be, certainly," he said. "But she's a bit . . . well, like I said, she's stubborn."

"So stubborn she'd say no to marriage to an earl?" Reilly leaned down to right his chair, then sat in it again. "I can't think of a single girl back in London who's *that* stubborn." Well, with the exception of a certain Miss Christine King. But then she'd said no to a marquis, not an earl. And she'd said it, to a certain extent, because Reilly often refused to acknowledge he was a marquis in the first place.

Glendenning nodded. For the first time since the food arrived, he'd stopped shoveling it into his mouth. Now he leaned forward and dipped his voice conspiratorially.

"I know. I tell you, Stanton, it's beginning to . . . well, unsettle me a bit." The voice dipped even lower. "I'm starting to think the girl doesna even like me."

Reilly lowered his own voice to match, though his tone, it must be noted, dripped with irony. "I can't imagine why. You're only throwing her out of her home."

"Oh, she hated me well before that," the earl assured him. "Why do you think I've had to stoop to such low tricks? I'm no' getting any pleasure from it, I assure you. But the girl's got to be made to see ___"

"What a kind and thoughtful fellow you are?"

Glendenning blinked, apparently thinking Reilly was serious. "No. What a fool she's being. She's never going to get anyone better than me. Not around here, anyway. I'm the wealthiest, best-looking, best-educated man on this island."

Which wasn't, Reilly thought to himself, saying much, considering what he'd seen of the island's adult male population thus far.

"Modest, too," was all Reilly said.

Glendenning appeared to be immune to sarcasm. "Right. This bit with the cottage—it's a last resort, really." The earl was silent a moment, examining the remains on his plate. Then, as his gaze appeared to fall upon a bit of bacon, he brightened and looked up. "Unless . . ."

Reilly raised his eyebrows. “Unless?”

“Well, unless you’d . . .” He was apparently too excited by his idea to go on with any lucidity.

“Unless I’d what?” Reilly demanded, suspiciously.

“Well, you’re an intelligent man, clearly. Educated. Oxford, and all that. She ought to respect that, I’m thinking.”

“I’m afraid,” Reilly said carefully, not liking the drift of the conversation, “that I don’t follow you.”

“Well, it just seems to me that if a bloke like you—an educated bloke—were to put it to her, she might be a bit more willing to consider the matter rationally. . . .”

Reilly stared at the man across the table from him in astonishment. He had rather thought that this was what the earl was leading up to, but to hear it put to him so bluntly . . . well, he could hardly credit what he was hearing. “Are you daft, man?” he demanded.

Lord Glendenning did not appear to have heard him. He said, obviously warming to his own idea, “No, ’twill be perfect! She’s always going on about fellows like you, fellows who write treatises on proper care of the teeth and whatnot. She’s bound to respect what you’ve got to say.”

Reilly, offended, said, “See here. I’ve never written a treatise in my life, let alone on proper care of the *teeth*—”

“You’ve just got to put it to her,” Glendenning went on, as if Reilly hadn’t spoken, “in a scientific light. She’ll like that. Tell her how it makes sense, really, the two of us marrying, since we’re of the same class. I’ve heard rumors that this uncle she was supposed to be staying with is a peer of some kind. So there’s no reason—”

“Lord Glendenning.” Reilly interrupted his employer stiffly but emphatically. “I am a physician. I am not a marriage broker. I will not aid you in your coercion of this young woman.”

The earl was clearly not a clever man. He was too good-looking ever to have been forced to use his wits to get what he wanted—at least, not on any regular basis. Reilly knew the type only too well. Half the student population at Oxford had been like the earl, at college because their father and their father’s father had attended it, not out of any thirst for knowledge.

But unlike many of those fellows Reilly had known, the earl did have a sort of cunning way about him, a sort of animal sense of survival.

It had to have been that and nothing more calculated that caused Glendenning to say what he did next, which was, “Well, that’s a shame. Just a shame, really. Because I was hoping to get her out of that cottage before the spring floods started. It was all right when her parents were there, of course,

but this will be her first spring on her own, and with her . . . *problem* . . . I'm no' sure it's the wisest thing, leaving her so isolated and alone. . . ."

Reilly didn't want to ask the obvious question. He knew the earl was playing him like a pianoforte. But he couldn't help himself. He asked reluctantly, "Problem? What precisely do you mean? Has the young lady a . . . problem?"

"Well, I didna want to say anything." Glendenning looked apologetic. "Least of all to you. It's nothing to be alarmed about, really. At least, I dunna think so. It's just that since she came back here, she's been acting . . . a bit strange."

Reilly ran his tongue over his front teeth. "Miss Donnegal has," he said, to clarify things.

"Yes. Nothing too terribly shocking. Well, aside from the fact that she's obviously run off from whoever it was who was supposed to be looking after her, and come back here, for no reason I can see. The fact is, since she's got back, she's been . . . well. Odd."

"Because she won't marry you?" Reilly demanded, woodenly.

"Aye, that . . . but other things, as well. Traipsing about the cemetery in the middle of the night, writing things down in a book. That sort of thing."

In spite of himself, Reilly widened his eyes.

"Writing things down," he said. "In a book. In the cemetery. In the middle of the night."

"Aye. And that's not all. Taken to wanderin' the village, too, after dark, with that same book, the one from the cemetery. Goes from house to house, writin' things in it. Then she locks herself up in a back room of the cottage, refusing to let anyone in. No telling what she's up to back there. It's probably something quite innocent. But people . . ."

Glendenning shrugged his enormous shoulders before going on. "Well, people are talking. And I must confess to you, I'm no' feelin' too good about it, a young woman, living all alone like that, with the floods coming. Our winters here on Skye are fairly mild, you know, but believe me, it isna a pretty thing when all the snows melt off the mountains. And if the lass's mental faculties should . . . well, slip further . . . I'd never forgive myself if we found her frozen to death or drowned. I can tell you, I wouldna want to be the one to write to her parents and tell them. . . ."

"Right."

Reilly tried to keep his voice steady. He didn't want his excitement to seem obvious. Glendenning could be—and probably was—embroidering upon the truth in order to win his cooperation.

But if even a part of what the earl had been describing was true, they could have a genuinely disturbed woman to contend with. Why would a woman—any woman—leave the safety and security

of her loving relations to live alone, in a place like Skye? And wander the village—not to mention the cemetery—in the dead of night?

Reilly's heart raced. Was this Miss Donnegan, then, his first patient?

But wait. If the woman really was so imbalanced, what was Glendenning about, wanting to marry her?

"Well, that's obvious, I should think," the earl said, when Reilly put the question to him. "I love her."

As simple as that. Three little words, and yet they carried with them a wealth of information. It was touching, really, this man's devotion to a woman who was clearly so in need of Reilly's services. A bonafide neurotic, it sounded like.

And the wandering about in the dark had to be a result of dementia.

Wait until he reported it to Pearson and Shelley. They would turn green with envy.

Still, it wouldn't do to let his enthusiasm show. Glendenning was obviously over the top for this woman.

"I suppose," Reilly said slowly, "it wouldn't hurt if I paid a short call upon her. To ascertain for myself the severity of her, uh, disorder."

Glendenning smacked his enormous hands together appreciatively. The resulting clap, like that of not-so-distant thunder, caused several of Reilly's drinking companions to moan in their sleep.

"I knew you were the right man for the job," the earl said happily, "the moment I set eyes on you."

The moment the earl had set eyes on Reilly Stanton, he'd been passed out face down at the bar of the local tavern house. But Reilly didn't feel there was any particular need to point this out to his employer. Instead, he said, "Well, if you wouldn't mind pointing me in a direction where I might find some warm water, I'll change, and have a wash and a shave. . . ."

Which was how, several hours later, Reilly found himself astride a shaggy but really quite spirited steed, brought down from the earl's stable especially, the boy who delivered it explained, for the doctor's own personal use. The boy—Rob, he said he was called, after the ancient king—had been assigned as Reilly's island guide, a role he seemed to take to laconically at best since he'd pointed out nothing since the start of their journey, with the exception of Castle Glendenning, which towered above the village—if that's what one called the ramshackle assortment of shacks that lined the single pier—like a bird of prey, perched on the edge of a crag some two hundred feet above sea level.

Not a very warm-looking place, Castle Glendenning, Reilly noted, craning his neck as they passed beneath it. The morning sun had chased away yesterday evening's fog, and for the first time he was

able to take note of his surroundings, finding them for the most part, pleasing. Snow covered just about everything, from The Tortured Hare's thatched roof to the castle's battlements, and where the snow had begun to melt, ice had formed. The few trees he could see had had their branches crystallized, winking in the bright, cold sun, and on their way from town they passed many a sheep with a fine coating of ice droplets clinging to its wool coat.

Still in all, Reilly was well pleased with his decision to come to Skye. The people were simple, it was true—with the exception, perhaps, of this perplexing Miss Donnegal, and of course the stunning but vastly irritating Miss Brenna—but that was actually refreshing after his London patients, who more often than not argued with his diagnosis, insisting their illness was more dramatic—or exotic—than in actuality it was. Those suffering from quinsy insisted it was malaria, and those with indigestion were convinced they were, in truth, suffering from a rare heart condition. He could never have hoped to make a difference in Mayfair. But here, at least, he had a chance at proving his true medical worth.

The boy—Rob—was leading him up a steady incline that led away from the castle and the village. The terrain was not at all smooth, being quite over grown and rocky, though there was clearly a road of sorts—more like a path, actually—that the horses seemed to follow without any real guidance. The village's population, Reilly knew from his reading, was a small one, numbering only around a hundred since last summer's plague had wiped out nearly a third of the residents. He noticed, as they passed the churchyard, a tattered flyer still attached to a black and leafless tree, instructing parishioners that the cemetery was full to capacity and that no more individual burials would be allowed: multiple graves only were to be permitted.

But even this somber reminder of last summer's horror—and it had not been pretty even in London, though none of Reilly's own patients had contracted cholera, a disease that had ravaged mostly poorer neighborhoods—could not dampen his spirits. He inhaled the clean, sharp air, tasting brine, yet found it vastly more palatable than the smut-filled air of London, so choked with smoke year round from burning coal fires. This, he couldn't help feeling, was the way God had intended His creatures to live, not thrust one on top the other, like in the city. And he felt a pang of genuine sympathy for Pearson and Shelley, who at that very moment were undoubtedly en route to their first call, and surely stuck in morning traffic.

And then the boy said, "That'll be 'er, over there. Burn Cottage."

Reilly looked where the boy pointed and saw a thoroughly charming, thoroughly lovely little cottage nestled on the far side of what, in summer, would surely be a raging torrent, but which in winter was simply a river, twenty feet wide with a swiftly moving current, and over which stretched a simple wooden bridge, wide enough to admit a horse and rider but certainly no vehicles of any sort. This then, was the burn, Reilly supposed. As perfect a place for a cottage as any he'd ever seen.

"I say," Reilly said, pulling his mount to a halt and staring. "What a picture."

The boy, hauling on his own set of reins, looked where Reilly was looking and appeared

unimpressed. A thatched roof wasn't nearly as picturesque to Rob as it was to Reilly, the boy having spent many a winter shivering under one. He seemed to think with equal disparagement of the burn.

"Aye," Rob said, giving his pony a laconic kick in the ribs. "There's a fire on." He nodded toward a plume of smoke that curled from the cottage's single chimney. "We'll be able to get a cuppa."

Then the pony's hooves were clopping along the wooden planks of the bridge. Obediently following his guide, Reilly reflected that if one had to go mad, Burn Cottage was hardly the place to do it. A brighter, more cheerful location he'd rarely seen. Now, Castle Glendenning, on the other hand, with its ancient towers and general air of darkening gloom would be just the place for a madwoman. . . .

And then the boy had slid from his saddle and was striding to the cottage's front door, quite confident in his reception. Reilly dismounted, noting the well-tended yard, with its snow-covered gardens—one clearly vegetable, if the dead tomato stalks were any indication, another apparently herbal, and one that must have been just for flowers—and reflected that madness took on many forms and that a lunatic could certainly have a nice yard, while keeping all manner of sickening things secreted away indoors. He himself had never actually encountered a madwoman, but Pearson had tended to an Italian contessa who'd had an unfortunate habit of luring pigeons into her attic, where she'd dismembered and ingested them, quite raw. Pearson had written a paper on the poor old thing, lucky blighter, and read it at a medical meeting, where it had been very well received.

Perhaps, Reilly thought, as Rob lifted a hand and rapped sharply on the cottage door, he'd be able to write a paper on the unfortunate Miss Donnegan. Necrology was a highly unusual neurosis. He had never heard of any pathologically disturbed individual keeping lists of the dead, a symptom which would certainly fascinate his peers—at least those in the medical community. He hadn't much hope of it impressing Christine. It was far more likely to sicken and disgust her. But if he managed to *cure* the girl of it. . . .

And then the cottage door swung open, and Reilly found himself looking not into the unfocused gaze of a lunatic, but the extremely lucid, extremely hostile eyes of the woman known about the village as Miss Brenna.

It was only then that Reilly realized he'd been had.



Brenna blinked at the tall man standing in the doorway, thinking that he certainly hadn't wasted any time. Good Lord, he'd only just arrived, and here he was already to claim his new home?

Well, that was the way, of course, with Londoners. They were a rude lot. Everyone knew that.

"I'm being as quick as I can," she said, knowing she sounded snappish, but unable to help herself, "but as I only just learned you were coming last night, you'll have to give me a day or two. I haven't even had a moment to pack, let alone find alternate lodgings."

The man stared at her with an expression on his face that could only be described as astonished. . . . Someone with a medical background might even have described it as apoplectic. Though why he should look so, upon Brenna's answering the door to her own cottage, she could not imagine.

"I'll be happy to discuss your lodging situation another time," she went on briskly. "But as you can see, I have a patient right now—" She flung an arm back to indicate the young boy who stood with his arms about a black and white dog that lay, rather indolently, across her kitchen table. It was the dog, of course, who was the patient: young Hamish MacGregor's collie Lucais had a nose for trouble and a taste for rabbit, and the two combined often ended up getting him into hot water—or one of Lord Glendenning's wolf traps, as in this particular case.

But what Dr. Reilly Stanton didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Let him think it was the boy, not the dog, who was her patient.

"So," she continued. "I'm afraid you'll have to come back another time. Good day."

She started to swing the door shut, thinking to herself not without some satisfaction that dressed, Dr. Stanton was not nearly so intimidating as when he was without a shirt. . . .

But then something hard stopped the door midway through its journey toward the catch, and push as she might, it would budge no further. A second later, in fact, it began to swing inexorably toward her, despite the fact that she was leaning the full of her weight upon it.

"Dr. Stanton," Brenna grunted, digging her heels into the floor. "Really . . ."

Her back to the door, she signaled for Hamish to help. The boy rushed forward, eager to take part

in what he evidently thought a grand game, and joined his weight to hers against the thick wooden portal.

It made no difference. As if their combined weights had been no more than a few dozen pounds, Reilly Stanton pushed his way inside the cottage, then stood there, staring down at the two of them, as if he'd never seen anything like them.

And, Brenna thought uncharitably, he probably never had.

Finally able to find his tongue, the doctor cried, "Good God! It *is* you! I wasn't certain."

Brenna, not having the slightest notion what he was talking about, turned her back on him and rejoined her patient, who'd lifted his shaggy head and was regarding the newcomer with a tail that thumped noisily against the tabletop. The dog's paw, having been caught in the jaws of a particularly nasty trap, was in a sorry state, something Brenna had been in the act of rectifying with needle and thread when the doctor's knock had distracted her.

"Suit yourself," she said sourly, lifting her needle and returning to her task with an air of more than just mild effrontery. "It is customary, however, to wait until the previous tenant has vacated before taking over occupancy oneself. . . ."

Hamish, a bright-eyed, freckle-faced boy of eleven, was gazing up at Reilly Stanton with curiosity. "Who's *he*?" he demanded, of no one in particular.

"The new physician," Brenna replied tersely. "He's here to throw me out. Now hold Lucais's leg still, please."

"He canna do that!" Hamish cried, glaring in Dr. Stanton's direction.

The good doctor, Brenna saw from the corner of her eye, had snatched off his hat, as if remembering at last that he was a gentleman—or supposed to be one, anyway. Now he stood, gazing down at her as she worked, apparently at a complete loss as to what to say.

Hamish, however, had enough to say for both of them.

"Miss Brenna's always lived here," the boy declared, radiating hostility. "You canna throw her out. If you try it, why, I shall . . . I shall *strike* you!"

Brenna, irritated as she was with Dr. Stanton's behavior, could not help but smile at the boy's threat. Hamish stood only as tall as the doctor's waist, but that did not seem to deter him in the least. She was careful to hide her smile, however, so the boy would not see it.

"Now see here—" Dr. Stanton seemed to have gathered his wits about him at last, and now stood looking down at the boy with an air of puzzled injury. "I don't intend to throw anyone anywhere. I came here because Lord Glendenning told me there was a Miss Donnegal residing in the cottage, a

woman who . . . Well.” After a fairly decent start, Dr. Stanton seemed suddenly to dry up. He glanced at Brenna. “Well, he failed to mention that Miss Donnegal was *you*.”

Brenna glanced at him dispassionately over her shoulder. “Yes,” she said, though she hadn’t the slightest inkling what he was talking about. “Well, I imagine that must have been quite a shock for you. If you’ll wait a few moments, I’ll be happy to discuss it with you, but as I said before, I’m rather busy just now. Are you going to stand there in the doorway like a simpleton, Rob, or do you plan on coming in? It’s getting quite cold in here, you know.”

Rob, never the sharpest lad on the island, grunted and gave the door a heave with his foot. Brenna nodded toward the fire on the hearth. “There’s tea in the pot,” she said, to the hapless Rob. “Help yourself. Mind you, it’s hot.”

Rob, doffing his fingerless gloves, made haste for the fire, leaving Dr. Stanton quite unattended. Brenna noted that he was looking about the room, and thought rather uncharitably, *Why, he’s already imagining where his things are to go. Cheeky blighter.*

But then the man foiled her by saying gallantly, “The light in here isn’t good for that, this time of day. Let me hold a lamp for you.”

And to her astonishment, he lit an oil lamp she kept on the mantel and held it in the air, directly over Lucais, who still reclined upon the dinner table.

Brenna, not knowing what else to say, murmured her thanks and set to work on the animal’s injury.

The silence while she did this was consummate, insofar as there was no conversation. But she could hear Rob messing about, as he prepared his tea—milk and *six* lumps of sugar, the little glutton. She’d be mindful not to leave the jar where he could reach it again. And she could hear Lucais’s panting, thankfully quite regular, and his master’s breathing, a little quicker and quite a bit more shallow, the boy not having as much faith in Brenna’s skill as the dog did.

And then there was the sudden thump of four cat’s paws landing on the floor, as Eiric sauntered over to see what all the fuss was about. And a few moments later, the ruffle of wing feathers as Brenna’s pet crow, Jo, found herself a perch with a better view in the beams overhead. And Sorcha, Brenna’s ginger-colored mutt, sat in faithful attendance beneath the table, her expression worried: Lucais was one of her favorite companions.

And through it all, Brenna could not help but be sensible of the man who stood beside her . . . a bit closer than beside her, actually. Reilly Stanton was actually leaning *over* her in an effort to keep the wound she was stitching well lit, so close that she could feel the considerable heat from his body beneath his cloak. She’d been wrong when she’d decided he was less intimidating dressed than he’d been shirtless: either way, he cut quite the daunting figure. It was rather disturbing, to have such a menacingly large male body looming over in her such a manner. . . .

At least, it should have been. Oh, she was uncomfortable. But not, she felt, for the reasons she

ought to have been, being a female alone in a room with such a robust figure of a man. Well, relatively alone. Rob and Hamish, she felt, hardly counted, since together they would not have been able to pry Reilly Stanton off her, should he choose to make any sort of untoward advances. . . .

Which, unfortunately, he did not.

Unfortunately? What was the matter with her? Why, she was no better than Maeve, lusting after the young doctor like some kind of love-starved schoolgirl. Even the scent of the soap the doctor had used to shave that morning was having a disturbing effect on her. It was a sharp, clean scent, and she recognized it after a while as Mrs. Murphy's lavender soap. She must have loaned a bar to the young physician. It was not a particularly provocative smell, and yet, Brenna realized—with a slight prickling sensation along the backs of her arms—the odor, mingled with the smell of the doctor's clothes, which must have been freshly laundered before they'd been packed away in his trunk, was oddly appealing.

Brenna told herself this was only because it had been so long since she'd been around a man who actually bathed on a regular basis, but it did no good. By the time she'd got Lucais's wound completely stitched up, she was as flushed as if it were a hot summer day, and had to excuse herself for a moment and duck into her bedroom.

There, she hurried to her wash basin, where she applied a wet towel to her face. What, she wondered, was wrong with her? She was as flushed as Flora tended to get whenever Iain MacLeod darkened her doorway.

And why? Because a man—a man who happened to smell, unlike any of the other men she'd encountered lately, clean—had stood too close to her.

Ridiculous! It was just the doctor, the irritating, foolish young doctor Iain MacLeod, nineteenth Earl of Glendenning, had hired in order to make her life a misery. A zealot, Lord Glendenning had called him, and he was surely correct. Why else would a man who smelled so good venture this far north?

Well, he was destined for disappointment. He'd get no glory, no gold here on Skye, that was for certain.

She'd make sure of *that*.

By the time she'd pulled herself together—and gathered a few things from the room adjoining hers, a room she always kept carefully locked—the young doctor was in earnest conversation with Hamish, who'd apparently overcome his hostility toward the physician enough to brief him on the facts of the case, which included some uncharitable references to Lord Glendenning and his habit of placing traps about his lands.

“Says there's wolves what eat up his deer,” Hamish was saying, “only I never saw no wolves. Foxes, maybe, but no wolves.”

Seated at the dinner table, his chin in one hand, while with the other, he slowly and probably quite unconsciously, stroked Lucais's right ear, Dr. Stanton nodded gravely.

"And meantime," Hamish went on, "good dogs like Lucais get their legs broke off."

"It isn't broken," Brenna said briskly, as she reentered the room. "The bone may be bruised, but it's quite sound."

Dr. Stanton stood up politely as she appeared, just like any London gentleman, and Brenna couldn't help noticing that his dark-eyed gaze, as it fell upon her, was very bright. She looked quickly away, a little unnerved to find that she felt warm again, when she'd only just given herself a thorough dousing with ice-cold water.

"I'm going to put a splint on it, though," she went on, relieved that she sounded—to her own ears, anyway—quite normal. Handsome Dr. Stanton's presence wasn't having the slightest effect on her. Not the slightest. "You're to keep Lucais from chewing this splint off. All right, Hamish?"

The boy said something indistinguishable. This was apparently because Hamish had helped himself—as had Rob—to a piece of the spice cake she'd set out to cool on the sideboard, and they both had their mouths crammed full of it.

"I wanted to tell you," Reilly Stanton said, "that I think your technique is splendid." He pointed to the dog's paw. "Did your father teach you that?"

"He did," Brenna said. She sat down, trying very hard not to show how uncomfortably aware she was of Dr. Stanton's gaze. She hoped he wasn't going to start being nice to her. How was she supposed to hate him—and she did, she quite thoroughly did—if he started being nice to her?

"So I take it," the physician said, "that since your father left the island, you've been tending to the people here?"

"The people," Brenna said, her words muffled, since she was holding a stick of wood between her teeth while she wound a bandage round the dog's foot, "and their pets, as you can see."

"You must be relieved I've come along, then," he said.

Brenna looked up at him in astonishment. Of all the conceited, arrogant—

"Well, because it must have been quite a strain on you," he explained rapidly, as if fearing his words had been misconstrued . . . which of course they had. "Being at the beck and call of everyone in the village, I mean. When I imagine you had better things to do."

"Not really," Brenna said. She could speak clearly now, having removed the stick from her mouth and applied it to Lucais's foot.

“Well, I just thought . . . you know, being a young lady, you might. . . . All the young ladies I know, back in London, spent the majority of their . . . time . . . well, shopping and attending garden parties, and . . .”

His voice trailed off as he looked at her face. She did not know what kind of expression she wore, but she imagined it must have been quite an astonished one since his next words were, “But I don’t imagine there are any garden parties, here on Skye.”

“Not hardly,” Brenna said, as she wrapped the dog’s foot in several feet of bandage, in hopes the thickness of the material would dissuade Lucais from trying to get at the splints.

“And I don’t imagine,” Dr. Stanton went on, with the same ironic tone, “that if there were, you’d be attending them.”

Brenna felt herself flush, but this time it was for far different reasons. How dare he? she fumed. How dare he imply that because she was medically minded, she was somehow unfeminine and might not take joy in something as frivolous as a garden party? Why, she’d been to dozens of garden parties and had had a jolly good time at all of them. . . .

Well, all right, maybe not dozens, and maybe she hadn’t had a very good time at the half dozen she’d been to, but he couldn’t know that. And what did she care what this London upstart—with his clean-smelling clothes and his broad chest—thought of her, anyway? She didn’t care. She didn’t care a jot.

Except . . .

Well, she would not be the careful scientist she knew herself to be if she did not admit the fact that Reilly Stanton was a thoroughly attractive man, who not only seemed to bathe regularly, but who likewise did not appear to be wholly unintelligent. And judging from her earlier reaction to his proximity, it would be quite difficult to keep herself from being drawn to him.

She would not, however, be swayed by cosmopolitan manners and the smell of lavender soap. And the easiest way to do that was to remind herself of just what it was he was doing in her cottage.

“So Lord Glendenning sent you, did he, Dr. Stanton?” Tying off Lucais’s splint, she patted the dog on the head to show him she was through, and he grinned at her in response, his tail thumping against the tabletop to show there were no hard feelings.

“He did not,” Dr. Stanton declared, with feeling.

“Oh?” Brenna raised her eyebrows. “I thought you said he did. You came on your own, then? Planning on taking any measurements? The fire smokes a little when it rains, but otherwise I can recommend the place most wholeheartedly.”

She had the pleasure of seeing that she'd managed to unnerve him. His jaw darkened, and he stammered, "That's not—that's not why I came, either." Then, as she sat there smiling in what she hoped he would take as detached disdain, he burst out, "Oh, all right. Lord Glendenning did send me. But not to size up the cottage—"

"No?" Brenna was surprised. "Then what—"

And just like that, it dawned upon her.

And suddenly, she found herself blushing for a third time. Only this time, it was with outright fury.

"Oh, I understand it now," she declared, coming to her feet so suddenly that she startled Jo, who beat her wings in surprise. "He sent you to size up *me*. Am I correct?" She could see by his uncomfortable expression that she was. "Just what did he tell you, then? That I'm feeble-minded? No, wait, I know." She held out both her hands. "A danger to myself. Is that it?"

"He said no such thing," Stanton replied, with obviously forced indignation.

"Of course he did. He's done it before. He sent you here to have a look at poor, pathetic Miss Donnegal, whom he hoped you'd try to encourage to accept his noble proposal of marriage." She was pacing now, up and down the length of the little cottage, her skirts whirling out around her each time she turned. She could not remember ever having felt quite so furious. Damn that interfering, ignorant excuse for a nobleman, anyway.

"But he neglected to tell you that Miss Brenna, whom you met last night, and poor pathetic Miss Donnegal are one in the same, didn't he?" She shook her head. "You must have had yourself quite a little shock when I opened the door."

To his credit, he answered her honestly.

"It wasn't shock," he admitted, "so much as disappointment you weren't still wearing trousers."

His candor—she convinced herself it was that and not his smile—brought her up short. She stared at him, completely at a loss as to how to reply. . . .

It was at that very moment that, for a third time that morning, someone thumped upon the front door of Burn Cottage.



“*T*hat’s him, I wouldn’t doubt,” the girl snarled. She had worked herself into quite the rage. She might not, Reilly told himself, attend garden parties with any regularity, but she had certainly mastered the art of feminine dudgeon.

“Come to see how I’m progressing with my diagnosis,” Reilly agreed with her. He was quite eager to stoke the flames of her ire. It wasn’t often he got to see a fine-looking woman in such a passion and he was quite enjoying himself. “Yes, I’m sure it is.”

This only served to enrage the girl further. Reilly didn’t think it would be an exaggeration to say that he thought he glimpsed a spark or two fly from those brilliant blue eyes.

He had to take his hat off to her. Christine at her finest—outraged, perhaps, over the injustices wrought by employers of child laborers—could not have held a candle to Miss Brenna Donnegan. Her wrath was exquisite.

He felt, in fact, quite sorry for Iain MacLeod. The earl was obviously out of his element where this particular young lady was concerned. There was not the slightest doubt in Reilly’s mind that when Brenna Donnegan tugged open that door and found Lord Glendenning upon her threshold, she was going to black his other eye, at the very least. It did not seem out of the realm of the possible that a minor dismemberment or two might occur, as well. Reilly positioned himself so that should the lady need his aid, he could come quickly to the rescue . . . and also so that he had an unobstructed view of the action.

But when Miss Donnegan tugged the portal open, it wasn’t the earl at all who stood there, but one of the girls from the tavern house, looking blue with cold and quite winded.

“Oh,” Maeve cried. “Oh, miss!”

“Good Lord.” Clearly startled, Miss Donnegan took hold of the girl’s arm. Before Reilly could step in to help, she’d propelled the barmaid toward the fire, unceremoniously kicking Rob, the child Hamish, and a very indignant tabby cat off the hearth.

“Maeve, you’re frozen through,” Miss Donnegan said in scolding tones. “What were you thinking, racing up here without so much as a shawl?”

“It’s Flora, miss,” Maeve managed to stammer, through chattering teeth. “Her time’s come. You’ve got to get to the castle right away.”

This was simply too much. Reilly had been prepared to stand back and, along with the unflappable Rob and the boy Hamish, take in the proceedings with a mouthful of spice cake, but this was simply too much.

“The *castle*?” Reilly looked down at the shivering girl. “What’s Flora doing at the *castle*?”

“She always goes to the castle,” Miss Donnegal said, “when her time comes.”

“Does she?” Reilly raised his eyebrows. Really, but it had been just one surprise after another since he’d crossed the burn. He ought to have known, of course, that the earl had been . . . well, embroidering upon the truth was the only polite way Reilly could think to put it. Still, it was a bit disconcerting, how far Lord Glendenning had gone in his effort to hide from Reilly the truth of the matter.

Which was, of course, that there wasn’t anything the slightest bit wrong with Miss Donnegal’s mental faculties, except that she had the good sense—uncommon, Reilly knew, in young ladies her age—to see through the earl and his Byronic posturing.

Still, Reilly’s surprise, when the door to Burn Cottage had been thrown open by none other than the young woman who’d been so rude to him the night before, had been considerable. So great was his shock that it had been some minutes before he’d been fully able to make the connection. Miss Brenna was actually Miss Brenna Donnegal, the same Miss Donnegal with whom Lord Glendenning was so besotted.

The same Miss Donnegal whose father had been surgeon up until his unceremonious abandonment of the position.

The same Miss Donnegal because of whom, Reilly’s future sleeping arrangements were so uncertain.

It was Miss Donnegal who had resuscitated the ferryman, Miss Donnegal who had swilled whisky straight from the bottle, Miss Donnegal who’d worn those fetching trousers, Miss Donnegal who’d ridden off astride into the fog.

And Miss Donnegal who seemed to dislike him a good deal.

Which seemed a bit unfair. It wasn’t as if he’d known what he was walking into when he’d answered Iain MacLeod’s advertisement in *The Times*.

At least, not entirely.

Miss Donnegal’s throaty voice broke in upon these reflections.

“Take Lucais home,” she said. “Make sure he stays off his feet for a day or so, at least. And no romping through the burn with him, either. Keep that injured foot dry.” It took Reilly a moment to realize she was addressing the boy with the border collie, and not him. “Bring him back in a few days—sooner if you notice a funny smell, or if he seems to be in a lot of pain—and we’ll take another look at him.”

The boy nodded obediently. “Yes, miss,” he said, and then, “Come on, boy.” The dog, who’d been doing a very good imitation of a swooning society matron, jumped up and was soon on all fours again, only slightly favoring the injured foot.

Reilly addressed Miss Donnegal carefully. “Have you any idea how far along she is? Flora, I mean?”

“Far enough,” came the blunt reply. Miss Donnegal had disappeared into the other room. Her voice, throaty but still strangely sweet, came floating out toward him. “What time did she start making her way up to the castle, Maeve?”

“I canna say.” Maeve had recovered some of her color, thanks to the heat from the fire and the steam from the mug she held, a cup of tea Miss Donnegal had thrust at her before disappearing into another room. “ ’Twas after breakfast, but afore the washin’ was done. There was a lot of washin’. Lord Glendenning came for breakfast, she said.”

Good God, Reilly thought. The girl had gone into early labor, and on account of his allowing that monster Glendenning to wake her and demand that she prepare them that massive breakfast. It was all his fault. Now a child would be brought too soon into the world, and he would have to live with the knowledge that it had all been in an effort to provide him with a few sausages.

“But she wouldna help with the dishes afterwards, on account of feeling peckish—” Maeve added this last as if she still didn’t quite believe this excuse. On the contrary, she seemed to think the entire pregnancy had been an invention, thought up purely to avoid dishwashing duty. “Then next thing I knew, she was puttin’ on her mittens, and told me to run and fetch—”

“Yes,” Reilly said in his most comforting tone. “Yes, of course. I’ll be there straight away. Rob, turn that pony of yours around and jog on back to the tavern and fetch my medical bag, will you? Just bring it straight to the castle. I’ll meet you there.”

Rob, whom Reilly had not taken for the shiniest knife in the drawer, only stared at him stupidly.

“Did you hear me, Rob?” Reilly had, of course, been cursed with idiot servants before, but this went quite beyond the pale. “Run along now. There’s a . . .” He thrust a hand in his trouser pocket and fingered his change. “A guinea in it for you.”

But Rob continued to sit where he was, until Reilly grew suspicious, and asked, “Is something the matter?”

Rob glanced at Maeve, who said a bit nervously, “B-beg your pardon, sir. But it’s not you Flora wants. ’Tis Miss Brenna she asked for.”

“Miss *Brenna*?” Reilly echoed incredulously.

“Oh, aye, sir,” Maeve said, her blue eyes very wide. “Miss Brenna’s delivered all of Flora’s babies. Well, wi’ Mr. Donnegan’s help, anyway.”

“All of . . .” It was Reilly’s turn to widen his eyes. The girl had mentioned, of course, that Flora always went to the castle “when her time came.” But just how many times had her time come? “How many babies has Miss Flora had?”

Maeve counted swiftly on her fingers. “This’ll be her fourth, I think.”

Four children? Four of them? All squeezed out of that tiny girl, who looked hardly old enough to be out of the schoolroom herself? Why, it was barbaric. Worse than barbaric. It was—

“Rob.” The voice of the indomitable Miss Donnegan rang out from the other room. “Go and saddle Willow for me and bring her round at once. There’s a good boy.”

To Reilly’s disbelief, the boy crammed the last of his slice of cake into his mouth and hastened from the cottage. Reilly turned, and saw that the Amazon—which was the only way Reilly could think of her, Miss Donnegan seemed entirely too formal a name for this creature who seemed to be made up entirely of mettle and flame, and Brenna . . . well, it went without saying that the name Brenna didn’t suit her at *all*—was coming out of what he assumed must be her bedroom.

In spite of his confusion, Reilly could not but be delighted when he saw that Brenna had changed out of the dress she’d been wearing when he’d first arrived—a charming affair, really, of rich blue wool, which set off the golden highlights in her russet hair, but was a bit of a letdown, after her startling ensemble of the night before—back into those very same trousers. She was carrying a black bag with her, the sort in which medical men kept the instruments of their trade, and snapping orders as competently as any army general.

“Maeve, take this cloak and wear it home. At your peril you try venturing out again without something warm over your shoulders. Despite this warm spell, it won’t be spring for quite a while yet. Dr. Stanton, if you’ll excuse me, I’m needed elsewhere. . . .”

“Excuse you?” Reilly shook his head. “Not likely.”

The Amazon had been heading toward the front door, where a pair of tall boots stood. Now she paused, and tossing away some of that glorious red gold hair—which she wore loose down her back, a style not much favored by Christine and her fashion-conscious friends—looked back over her shoulder.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, in that disturbingly gravelly, but oddly appealing, contralto.

Reilly tugged his hat into place. “I’ll handle it, of course,” he said. In order to gain the confidence of others, he’d learned long ago it was important to exude confidence oneself. “There’s no reason you have to trouble yourself, Miss Donnegan.”

“Trouble myself?” The Amazon straightened up—she’d been unlacing her shoes, in preparation for slipping on the boots. “Whatever are you talking about?”

“Well, I understand,” Reilly said, “that since your father left, you’ve been seeing to the medical needs of the community. But that really isn’t necessary now, is it? I mean, now that I’m here.”

Brenna stared at him. He stared right back, trying to keep his expression pleasant. This was difficult because he had the feeling that a good deal was riding on the outcome of this . . . well, discussion, he supposed one might call it. Not that he was particularly looking forward to delivering Flora’s baby—in fact, back in London, Reilly had only under the rarest circumstances been called upon to attend a birth. That’s what midwives were for, of course. And if there were complications, one sent for a surgeon. Physicians were generally only brought in after the fact, if the new mother was in need of a prescription for pain, or the child seemed out of sorts.

So why was he arguing? Why was he making such a fuss over the right to deliver the illegitimate offspring of the local barmaid?

Because it wouldn’t do, it really wouldn’t, for these people to look to this unlicensed, and certainly improperly trained, young woman for their medical care—not now that he was on the island. How was he ever going to prove himself—and this time, he didn’t mean prove himself to Miss Christine King, at least, not entirely—if he was never given a chance to?

He’d have to go carefully, of course. He didn’t want to offend Miss Donnegan, who was clearly held in much esteem by the villagers. But everyone was going to have to be made to see that Reilly Stanton was the person to be sent for in an emergency, not the old surgeon’s daughter, however more palatable her fetching demeanor might make the medicine.

And it was for her own good, after all. No woman who looked like Brenna Donnegan looked ought to be dashing about, delivering babies and reviving drunken ferrymen. It was quite absurd, really. In London, she’d undoubtedly have been the toast of the season. Why, she and Christine King might even have been friends!

Then, remembering the practiced ease with which Miss Donnegan had raised that whisky bottle to her lips, he thought perhaps friendship between her and Christine might be unlikely. Still it was only in an isolated, backward place like this that a beautiful woman like Brenna Donnegan was treated just like any other. . . .

Well, maybe not like any other. Reilly hadn’t noticed too many other women on Skye in trousers.

“Dr. Stanton,” the young woman said slowly, “I appreciate the gesture—I really do. But I assure you, it’s entirely unnecessary. I’ve delivered a good many babies, and I certainly don’t need—”

“I’m sure you don’t,” Reilly said, conscious that both the girl, Maeve, and the boy, Hamish, neither of whom had left yet, were watching them with wide and interested eyes. “But I’m the new physician here. There’s no reason you should be burdened with delivering Miss Flora’s baby.”

Her quite extraordinarily bright eyes narrowed.

“She asked for me.”

Well, Reilly said to himself. There’s that, of course.

“Nevertheless,” he said, in what he hoped she would think was a masterful tone, brooking no disobedience. “I am going.”

If she was impressed by his tone, Miss Donnegan didn’t show it. She did look at him a bit curiously as she said, “Suit yourself. But I’m going, too.”

“Fine,” he said, setting his jaw.

“Fine,” she said, her own jaw not looking particularly loose.

“Fine,” he said, again.

“Um,” Maeve said meekly, from the hearth. “Beggin’ your pardon, sir, miss, but if you’re goin’, you better get to it. Flora wasna lookin’ so perky when I saw her last. . . .”

But Maeve’s alarm, as it happened, proved to be precipitous. Flora was in labor, it was true. But her contractions were still a good ten minutes apart, and she seemed, in spite of Maeve’s assertions, extremely perky, in Reilly’s opinion. In fact, she was sitting up in the straw bed with which she’d been provided in a room off the castle’s kitchens, and reading, he was astonished to note, ladies’ journals. Reading was perhaps the wrong word, as Flora clearly could not read. But she seemed to enjoy looking at the fashion plates.

“Look at this one here, Miss Brenna,” she said, as the two of them came hurrying into the room. “Isna this a pretty one? I’m of half a mind to send for the pattern.”

Reilly, having been taxed beyond all endurance by the wild ride to get to the castle, collapsed onto a rickety chair beside the bed and attempted to catch his breath. His appendages were all numb with cold. He could not feel his fingers or his ears. Brenna Donnegan, on top of everything else, was an excellent horsewoman, whose gray mare, Willow, liked to eschew modern-day conveniences like bridges and roads, and opt instead for the more challenging terrain of gulch and gully.

Either that, or the imitable Miss Donnegan had been hoping to throw Reilly off her trail. He rather

thought it might be the latter, because when she'd pulled up on Willow's reins, inside the castle's portcullis, and seen that Reilly was still behind her, a look of distinct surprise had crossed her face. Still, she'd said, with obviously grudging admiration, "You ride well . . . for a Londoner."

He'd had to hide both his advanced state of exhaustion—brought on no doubt by the large amounts of whisky he'd consumed the night before—as well as his astonishment at the state of dilapidation into which the earl had let his home sink. As its name suggested, Castle Glendenning was, in fact, a real castle with actual turrets, battlements, and, Reilly supposed, even a dungeon. Made of crumbling stone by some ancient relative of the current earl, it was a dark and hideous fortress, and Reilly imagined its occupants must be very uncomfortable indeed. It wasn't any wonder that Brenna Donnegal refused to wed the earl. Burn Cottage seemed infinitely the more comfortable dwelling.

Why the waiflike Flora should choose to give birth in this horrible place, Reilly could not imagine. It certainly was not with any thought to the comfort of either herself or her child. The squalid room to which they'd been led by a fat but distinctly unjolly cook was filled with piles of potatoes and onions, and quite without a fire. Reilly had never seen anything like it before. Oh, certainly he'd *heard* of such rooms, from lecturers who'd come to his college and described some of the adverse conditions in which they'd been forced to work. But Reilly had never expected to find such a room in a *castle*, a castle owned by a supposedly forward-thinking man like the earl.

Still, it was, after all, what he'd come here for. To help the poor and oppressed. More than that, however, he wanted to show Christine that he was not going to sit back and allow his notoriety as the "marquis physician" do his work for him. No, he intended to prove his worth as a doctor on his own merits, his own abilities, not by the number of peers on his patient list.

And yet somehow, he'd never pictured himself sitting amid piles of vegetables, listening to a pregnant barmaid wax eloquent over some fashion plates.

"See here," Flora said, turning one of the pages for Brenna's perusal. "Puffed sleeves are quite the rage. I havena any myself, but when his lordship and I are married, I shall have a whole wardrobe full."

"Of course you will," Brenna said. She had sat down, comfortably as you please, on an overturned apple basket, and had picked up a journal of her own, which she was flipping through as casually as ever Reilly had seen Christine flip through a copy of *Godey's* in her sitting room.

"If this one's a boy," Flora went on amiably, "he'll certainly marry me this time."

"I should hope so," was Brenna's mild reply.

"Willna Mrs. Murphy be sorry," Flora rattled on, "when she has to milady me? I shall certainly laugh when that happens."

"As well you should," Brenna said.

“Do you think—” Flora’s voice was wistful. “—I’ll get to keep this one, Miss Brenna?”

“We’ll see,” Brenna replied.

Reilly, sitting on his chair, began to feel perhaps he’d been wrong to come, after all. This was clearly a situation that the indomitable Miss Brenna could handle with aplomb. True, she wasn’t licensed to practice medicine, but what midwife was? Why not allow her this little victory? It might, in the end, win him her approval, and the approval of a woman like Brenna Donnegan might go a long way in endearing him to the other islanders. . . .

Perhaps, he thought, he should go and search out the earl. He had to be about this monstrosity of a castle somewhere. And he was bound to have whisky. Whisky which might enable Reilly to feel his feet and hands again. Reilly needed to speak to Lord Glendenning anyway. He had to explain that, whatever else she might be, Brenna Donnegan was infinitely sane, and not at all a danger to herself or to others. Perhaps it might be possible, Reilly envisioned asking the earl, to rent him a room at the tavern house, until Miss Donnegan had had time to find alternate accommodations?

Thinking he had better write down just exactly what it was he planned on saying to the earl, Reilly took out his journal, pen, and ink bottle. It wasn’t easy, writing with a book open in his lap, but he managed fairly well.

February 15th, Eighteen hundred and forty-seven

Attending birth of child by local barmaid. Perhaps a bit of fatherly advice due to girl: he won’t buy the cow if he can get the milk for free, or something along those lines.

Burn Cottage is all that is charming, picturesque as a Gainsborough. Christine would highly approve rustic thatched roof. Only one prob: currently occupied by Amazon.

It was at this point that Flora suddenly sat up and let out an earsplitting scream.

Reilly was relieved to find he was not the only one startled by this sudden outburst. Brenna dropped her magazine and was up off the apple basket like a shot.

“What is it, Flora?” she asked, rushing to lay a hand upon the girl’s shoulder. “What’s wrong?”

Flora’s face, which was quite a pretty one, did not look pretty now. It was twisted with horrible pain. “Something’s no’ right,” she declared. “Something’s no’ right at all, Miss Brenna.”

At which pronouncement Brenna reacted immediately, by throwing back the blankets which covered the girl’s lower half, and peering beneath them, and then feeling beneath them, while Flora, who’d fallen back against the pillows, began to keen in an extremely loud voice for such a small girl.

The cook appeared, a kettle of hot water in her arms. “What’s all that shoutin’ about?” she wanted

to know. “Like to wake the dead.”

Reilly, his journal and pen forgotten, leaped up and took the pot from her.

“We’ll need a good deal more than this,” he said. “And some clean sheets and towels, if you have them.”

“Sheets?” The cook stared at him grumpily. “And towels? If you think, young man, that I’m wasting his lordship’s good sheets and towels on that piece of trash lyin’ in there—”

Flora let out another shriek. Reilly, who did not consider himself a violent man, nevertheless said, “Madam, if you do not do as I say, I will be forced to do you a bodily harm.”

The woman actually looked alarmed. “I’ll see what I can do,” she said, and hastily left the room.

So fierce was his antipathy toward the Earl of Glendenning’s cook—and the Earl of Glendenning himself, and men in general, for being so thoroughly amoral—that Reilly was quite startled when, a second later, Miss Donnegal tugged at his sleeve, her expression troubled.

“I don’t know what to do,” she whispered, in order not to be overheard by the patient. “It hasn’t turned all the way.”

“What hasn’t turned all the way?” Reilly asked, stupidly.

Brenna gave him a well-deserved look of contempt. “The *baby*. What else? It’s got to be . . . guided.”

“Right.” Reilly tried to appear calm. “Have you done that before? Turned a baby in utero, I mean?”

“Yes.” Brenna blinked. “I mean, no. Not a human baby. Sheep, quite a few times.”

Reilly brightened. “Well, then, go to it.”

Brenna glared up at him. “It’s not that simple. There isn’t a whole lot of room in there. Flora’s babies are always enormous, and she’s a very small girl. I don’t think I can do it.”

“Well,” Reilly said flatly. “*I* can’t do it.”

Her glare grew even more resentful. “I thought you studied in Paris,” she hissed. “With the finest minds in medicine.”

He hissed right back at her, “The finest minds in medicine can’t help in this situation. We need somebody with small hands.” He put down the steaming kettle and stretched out his fingers, palms toward her. “Look at these monstrous things. You think these are fit to do the job?”

Brenna held up one of her own hands, then placed it against his own, as if measuring the difference

between them. Her fingers were roughly half as thick as his and each an inch shorter.

Reilly looked down at their two hands, laid palm to palm, and felt something strange. He could not tell just what, exactly, it was that he felt. He only knew that the sight of their fingers together like that, hers so slight and feminine against his own, unsettled him rather a lot. It made the screaming in the background fade until it was barely audible and brought into startling clarity the fact that each of Miss Donnegan's blue irises were rimmed on the outer edge with a band of color that was so dark, it was almost black.

He could not help but feel it was exceedingly fortunate that Miss Donnegan, for her part, took one look at the difference between their two hands and swore very colorfully. Like a bucket of cold water, this served to douse whatever warm feeling Reilly might have been entertaining toward her. He hastily broke the contact.

"Well, that's that," he said. "Go to it, then." Taking her by the shoulders, he turned her back toward the patient. "Mind the cord, now. Make sure it doesn't get tangled round the little fellow's neck."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," she muttered.

Then, taking a seat by Flora's head, Reilly reached for her hand and said, "Hello, there. Nothing to worry about. Miss Donnegan has everything under control."

Flora eyed him suspiciously. "What are *you* doing, then?"

"Me?" Reilly smiled down at her. "I'm here to encourage the two of you. I heard you discussing fashion just now, and since I've just come from London, I feel I ought to warn you, those magazines are a bit outdated. Puffed sleeves aren't the thing at all anymore. In fact . . ."



“*A* nother girl, eh?” Lord Glendenning did not rise from the chair in which he reclined, which he’d placed as closely as he could to the great fire without actually being in it. “Well, that’s a shame.”

Reilly thought about leaning down and seizing the earl by the hood of the ridiculous cloak he wore, then tossing him, physically, across the room.

But violence, Reilly knew from experience, tended not to be very effective where louts like the earl were concerned. It only served to confuse them.

He said instead, “She almost didn’t make it. Mother or child. It was only because of Miss Donnegan’s skill that either survived.”

Glendenning glanced at Brenna Donnegan, who was standing by the fire with her arms folded across her chest.

“She doesna still think I’m going to marry her, does she?” he wanted to know.

“Indeed,” Brenna said, with a calm Reilly envied. “She does. She’s waiting for you below. She wants to show you your daughter.”

“Bah.” Glendenning pushed himself up from his chair and crossed over to the sideboard where a decanter of whisky sat, along with several glasses. “Daughters. I’ve got four of ’em, now, you know.”

Brenna said, “I know.”

Glendenning, his back to them, brought his fist down suddenly upon the sideboard, causing the crystal there to tinkle warningly. The dogs, lying about the floor in various stages of repose, lifted their heads and blinked up at him.

Then, without another word, the earl turned, his great black cape swirling out behind him, and strode from the room.

Reilly watched him go, then looked at Brenna. “How on earth have you managed to put up with him all these years without running a dirk through his heart?” he asked half seriously.

Brenna laughed. He glanced at her, startled by the sound. Since he'd met her, he'd only heard her laugh once before, and that first time had been, he thought, a sarcastic chortle at his expense. Hearing her full-throated laughter now, in this gloomy place, shocked him a little.

Or perhaps he was simply starting to become as barmy as all the rest of the residents of this godforsaken place.

Take Flora, for instance. Reilly knew now why she'd insisted on coming to the castle to deliver her child: for the same reason she'd insisted on coming to the castle for her three previous deliveries. The girl was clinging to the sad hope that, if she happened to deliver him a son, the earl might legitimize the baby by marrying her.

It wasn't, according to what Brenna had told him on their way to the great hall to deliver the earl the news of his latest daughter's birth, in the least likely to happen, but Flora wasn't giving up. It was the hope that kept her going, throughout each pregnancy.

And then there was Iain MacLeod himself. Here he was, professing to be head over heels in love with Brenna Donnegal, and yet he lost no opportunity in bedding the local tavern staff whenever the fancy struck him. Reilly didn't think he'd ever met as hypocritical and loathsome a man in his life. The Earl of Glendenning was everything Reilly had striven hard all his life *not* to become.

"Oh, he isn't that bad," Brenna surprised him by saying, when he vocalized his feelings on the earl's behavior.

"Isn't that bad?" Reilly blinked at her. Her sweater was stained with afterbirth, and there was a smudge of blood on her forehead, but truth be told, she still looked disturbingly pretty. Most likely, he told himself, because of those trousers. He put those fascinating dark rings around her irises firmly out of his mind. "I think Glendenning is right: you *are* mentally unbalanced, Miss Donnegal."

She grinned. "I'll admit, he may seem on the surface to be a cad and a blackguard, but I've known Lord Glendenning all my life, and I can state with authority that beneath all that bluster lies a relatively good heart. Not—" The grin disappeared, to be replaced by a grimace. "—like *some* men of wealth and status that I've known."

Reilly raised his eyebrows at this. "You've known many?" His incredulity must have shown in his voice, since she threw him a withering look.

"I have been to London, Dr. Stanton," she said drily. "I am not a complete peasant. I have known men who used their titles for personal gain and then hid behind them when any sort of criticism came their way. All those men in your Royal College of Physicians, for instance. They aren't interested, the majority of them, in the science of medicine or even in its application, but in how it can glorify their own names. Bring any one of them to the bedside of a sick child whose parents could not pay the appropriate fee, and that child would die without treatment." The blue eyes flashed. "Half of them think that because they are peers, they needn't bother learning sound medical practice at all, as they are called Sir So-and-So, or Lord Whatnot, and that is all the qualification they need. It is virtually

impossible for any man who is not a peer to qualify for a license, but that does not mean that the majority of the men currently holding licenses are fit to practice medicine. Not by any means.”

Reilly’s eyes widened at this. It was so close to his own feelings—particularly about the titled peers in his own profession—that he was, for a moment, rather shocked.

Then a different realization came over him. It was clear from Miss Donnegal’s tone that she did not consider Reilly one of those privileged elite whose ethics—or lack thereof—she’d spoken of so scornfully. And that was because he hadn’t told her that he was in actuality not Dr. Stanton, but Lord Stillworth.

Something, he decided then and there, he would just keep to himself for the time being.

“But Lord Glendenning,” Brenna went on, in a slightly lighter tone, “for all his faults, isn’t like that.

He would never willfully hurt anyone. He really does care for Flora, you know. In his way.”

Reilly shook his head. He certainly hadn’t expected to hear the Earl of Glendenning’s behavior defended by Miss Brenna Donnegal, who not only had every reason to despise the man, but was by far the most independent-minded creature he had ever had occasion to meet—and he’d met quite a few of those man haters, as they’d seemed to gravitate toward the charitable functions Christine had always been dragging him to, back in London. It had grown rather tiresome, hearing his sex maligned to such a degree. He was perfectly aware that there were more than a few blackguards out there, and the laws that held that a competent woman could not manage her own affairs were, of course, ludicrous. . . .

But Reilly was not so certain they weren’t justified, in certain individual cases.

“Yes, well,” Reilly heard himself say, a bit tersely, “I can’t say I like his way of caring for her, if it’s going to mean a baby every year. Who’s feeding these little tykes, I’d like to know?”

“Oh, Lord Glendenning does,” Miss Donnegal replied, readily enough. “Flora can’t be trusted to raise them, of course—she’s not proven particularly maternally inclined, though she does loves them and visits them often. I’m of the opinion that, with the help of a trustworthy nursemaid, she might not do so badly. But his lordship prefers to secret his progeny away to a convent in Lochalsh, where you can be sure they get a better education than they’d ever receive if they stayed here. Better food, too, I shouldn’t wonder. The nuns see to it, in exchange for a generous donation from the earl’s estate.”

Reilly frowned. “Well,” he said, grimly. “There’s that, at least. I suppose it’s better than their being brought up here.”

He glanced around the great hall in which they stood and couldn’t help shuddering a little. It was bitterly cold in the large room, as it seemed to be all over the castle. The furniture inside the hall was sparse and almost randomly arranged, except for Lord Glendenning’s chair, which had quite purposefully been set in what was surely the warmest spot in the building.

“Oh,” Brenna said, with a shrug. “I’ve always thought a few children might help ward off some of the gloom of this old place.”

Reilly eyed her suspiciously. “Do I take it, then, that your resistance to Lord Glendenning’s wooing is merely a flirtation?”

Her eyes went round as saucers. “Good God, no. *I* don’t want to marry him. And he, as I’m sure you know, only wants to marry me because—”

She broke off. When she continued to speak, Reilly was left with the strange impression that this was not what she’d been going to say: “I’m the only woman on the island he hasn’t had, and he knows he can’t get me any other way.”

Reilly raised his eyebrows at this piece of information. Really, but Miss Donnegal was one of the most forthright women he’d ever met. Forthright and determined. He tried to picture Christine delivering a tavern wench’s illegitimate offspring and failed. She would have been much more likely to deliver a lecture to the poor girl on the evils of fornication, though she would undoubtedly have found Lord Glendenning a fascinating character. “So without affect!” he could almost hear her exclaiming. “Such a *man’s* man.”

Christine, a little time away from her and her world was forcing Reilly to admit, had not always possessed the soundest judgment when it came to people’s characters.

“Do you want to see something?” Brenna asked him, suddenly.

Reilly was no fool. He said without hesitation, “Of course.”

But what Miss Donnegal showed him was not, as he had—rather unrealistically, he realized—hoped, an interesting birthmark or mole located on or about her breast. Instead, it was a small door off the side of the great hall, which led up an exceptionally steep and twisting staircase.

Still, the trip was not entirely wasted, since Miss Donnegal went before him, and Reilly had the lovely view of her hips and backside, neatly sealed in the heart-shaped package of the seat of her trousers, swinging before him the whole time.

Then she flung open another door, and his breath was quite sucked from his chest . . . and not just from the cold, either. For they were on the castle’s battlements, hundreds of feet in the air, and all around him he could see the ocean, slate blue except for where it was churning with whitecaps. Overhead stretched the wide expanse of robin’s-egg blue sky, in which not a cloud could be seen. Fields that would, in springtime, be filled with heather, turned into hills and eventually craggy mountains that were, this time of year, snow peaked.

Never in his life had Reilly seen a more breathtaking view. The Swiss Alps, to which he had frequently escorted his mother when she’d gone to take a cure, were nothing to it.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Brenna pushed some of her red-gold curls away from her face, where the wind seemed intent on blowing them. “I like to come up here whenever I can. It’s an excellent view. See down there? There’s the tavern. And over there, the churchyard. And Burn Cottage, a little beyond that. You can see the burn, winking in the light.”

Reilly tried to look where she was pointing. Really, he did. But he soon saw a view a good deal more awe inspiring than the one she was indicating, and that was the one in front of him. Brenna Donnegal was something to be seen in any light, but bright sunlight seemed to bring out the best of her very many attributes, including the golden highlights in her red hair and the fine smoothness of her creamy skin. Now he was able to see that, not only were her irises ringed in black, but that her eyelashes, too, were ebony, a startling fact, considering her auburn hair and eyebrows.

Reilly found himself unable even to so much as glance at the sights she was pointing out. Why should he, when before him was a sight of such near perfection?

“And those little white dots, believe it or not, are sheep,” she was explaining. “Hamish’s flock, I should think, this time of day. You’ll meet his parents soon, I imagine. Very pleasant people. Simple, but kind. Hamish runs a bit wild, but he has Lucais to look after him. . . .”

“You were brilliant down there,” Reilly said, before he was even aware of uttering the words out loud.

She glanced at him curiously. “I beg your pardon?”

“Down there,” Reilly said. He wanted to take the words back, to stuff them back down into his mouth and swallow them. Don’t *flatter* her, he rebuked himself. Somehow, he knew, flattery from him would be misconstrued by the very distrustful Miss Donnegal.

But it was too late. She’d already heard him and was looking up at him with those wide, knowing eyes already glinting with suspicion. . . .

“With Flora, I mean,” he hastened to add, hoping to rectify the situation. “I think you did a splendid job. Considering what you had to work with.”

She blinked at him. The suspicion was magically gone from those eyes that were, he noted, the same color as the sky above them.

“Well,” she said. “Thank you. That means a lot, coming from a man of your impeccable training.”

He grinned. Sarcasm was better than suspicion, anyway.

“I’m a physician,” he said. “Not a midwife. I’d only been to one birth before this, and that was my own.”

She gaped at him. “Then why, in heaven’s name, did you insist on coming to this one?”

He considered telling her the truth—that he was determined to be accepted by this community, backward as it was. But that would be as good as admitting that he was determined to push her out of that same community . . . at least medically. And that would not, he knew, incline her toward any sort of friendly feeling for him.

And it was important that she feel friendly toward him. Because he needed to gain the trust of her patients, so he could, in turn, make them his patients.

Or at least, that’s what he decided was the reason, when he asked himself why it was so important that Brenna Donnegal like him.

So he chose a flippant response:

“I suppose because I wanted to see what the castle looked like.”

She knit her lovely brows and stared up at him. “You’re a very strange man, Dr. Stanton.”

“Oh, that’s amusing,” he said, with a laugh, “coming from a woman who goes about in trousers and apparently spends inordinate amounts of time in graveyards.”

She didn’t, however, share his mirth. Instead, she squinted to see him more clearly in the strong sunlight.

“Who,” she asked, in a wooden voice, “told you that? About the graveyards, I mean?”

Reilly shrugged. He didn’t feel he would be betraying his employer’s trust by telling the truth. He rather felt his employer had betrayed his, by not having told him the whole truth in the first place.

“Lord Glendenning,” he said. “He used it as an example of your mental instability, one of the reasons you shouldn’t be allowed to remain in Burn Cottage on your own—”

She turned abruptly and started for the door to the stairs. Reilly, taken completely off guard by this reaction to his words, had to move very fast indeed to intercept her.

“Whoa, there,” Reilly cried, managing to capture her just before she slipped out the door by seizing her by the arm. “Where are you going?”

“To kill him,” came the muffled reply, as she tugged, with surprising strength for a woman, on her arm. “Let go of me.”

Good Lord. He’d heard, of course, about redheads and their tempers, but this was his first real taste of such a thing.

“Wait just a moment, now.” Reilly moved so that he was blocking her path toward the door. “You

wouldn't want to murder the man on his little girl's birthday, would you? That wouldn't be very nice now, would it?"

Wrenching her arm from his grip, Brenna reached to push some of her windswept hair from her eyes. "Dr. Stanton," she said, evenly. "Get out of my way."

"You know, you oughtn't take gossip so to heart," Reilly said, trying to keep his tone light. "People might start thinking it has a grain of truth to it." Like I'm starting to, he thought to himself.

She did not smile.

He tried again.

"Lucky for you this is the nineteenth century. Otherwise, you could be burned at the stake as a witch for that sort of thing, you know. Roaming about in cemeteries after dark, I mean."

Again, no smile. Instead, she demanded, "How much did he pay you?"

Reilly, confused, shook his head. Really, but these islanders behaved more inexplicably—and changed the subject faster—than any group of people he'd ever met before in his life.

"How much did who pay me?" he asked, bewilderedly. "And for what?"

"Lord Glendenning." That shrewd azure gaze never left his face. "How much did he pay you to come here? Because I'm willing to double it."

Reilly was so taken aback, he could only gape at her.

"I'm quite serious." She was, too. Seriousness seemed to be seeping from every pore, and her body was as tense as a cat's, right before it pounced. "Whatever your debts back in London, I'll gladly pay them, if you'll just go away."

Debts? What in God's name was the girl talking about? Maybe Glendenning was right. Maybe she *was* mentally unhinged.

"I thank you very kindly for your offer," Reilly said carefully, "but I haven't any debts back in London."

The girl's brow furrowed. "You must have. Why else would you come here? Surely Lord Glendenning offered you—"

"The pay for the physician's position Lord Glendenning advertised is, as I'm sure you know, negligible." Reilly stared down at her. Really, this day was growing stranger and stranger. If he wasn't mistaken, this young lady was actually trying to *bribe* him into leaving the island. And, not knowing he was one of those peers she seemed to detest so much, she thought money was the way to do it. He couldn't help grinning as he added, "I can assure you, my motivations for accepting this

position were not pecuniary.”

Her brow puckered even further. “Then why?” she demanded. The frustration she felt was evident in her hoarse voice. “Why on earth would you leave London to come here, of all places? There must hundreds of far more profitable positions for a physician of your caliber. Why *this* one?”

“Well, that’s easy,” he said, with a shrug. “I came for the haggis.”

When she only continued to look up at him impatiently, he said, “All right, all right. I’ll tell you why I chose Skye: because it seemed to me to be about as far from London as a fellow could get and still be on British soil.”

“And what’s in London,” she wanted to know, “that you’re so intent on escaping?”

He was not surprised by her acuity. How could he be, considering what he knew of her thus far?

“Well, if you must know,” he said, “my former fiancée.”

Whatever reaction he’d expected from her, it was not the one he got: she burst out laughing.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Not *really*.”

Chagrined, he set his jaw. The haggis remark she hadn’t found in the least amusing, but this, *this* she evidently thought hilarious.

“I don’t suppose it was so much that I wanted to escape her,” he explained tersely, “as I wanted to prove her wrong. She accused me, you see, of being a bit of a wastrel, and I figured—”

“You figured coming to Lyding would be the very opposite of any proper wastrel’s inclination?” She nodded, still grinning. “I see. Excuse me for laughing. It’s just that I told Lord Glendenning that there must be a reason you’d come here, so far from your practice, which I understood was quite successful. I assumed he’d bribed you. But he said it was something like . . . well, like what you just said. A desire to do good works.”

He managed a smile. An unconvincing one, he expected, but a smile just the same.

“What about you, then?” he asked. “Why did you come back to the island, knowing your parents had left it and you’d have to live here all alone?”

She cocked her head. “Do you hear that?” she asked. “I believe the earl is calling to us.”

Reilly did not, in fact, hear anything except the wind and the occasional shriek of a seagull, riding the waves below them.

“I didn’t hear a thing,” he said. “Now, tell me truthfully. Because I can’t imagine your parents, if they knew, would be at all happy to hear about your living here all alone.”

“We ought to go down,” she said. And she started to move past him.

Reilly was not certain which of them was the more startled, Miss Donnegan or himself, when he reached out and seized her by the hand.

“Miss Donnegan,” he heard himself say. “Why are you evading my question?”

Her hand in his felt warm and very much alive. Was it his imagination, or had her pulse leaped beneath his fingers? Was it possible that Miss Brenna Donnegan was as affected by his proximity as he was by hers?

If so, he certainly couldn’t tell by her voice, which was as throaty and authoritative as ever.

“Dr. Stanton,” she said evenly, “kindly let go of my hand.”

“I will,” he said, “when you’ve answered my question.”

His own pulse wasn’t quite steady either, which was odd. There was no denying that Brenna Donnegan was an extraordinarily pretty girl, but she certainly wasn’t the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. Christine, with her pale hair and dainty figure, was far more traditionally beautiful than Miss Donnegan.

So what was it that was causing his heart to palpitate so strangely?

Brenna, pulling on her hand, said between tugs, “I understand, of course, that a living situation comes with the position you’ve accepted. But up until last night, I hadn’t the slightest idea you were coming, so . . .”

If this wasn’t a blatant attempt to change the subject, Reilly didn’t know what was.

“Miss Donnegan,” he said. “All I want to know is—”

“It will take me a little time,” she went on, still tugging, “to vacate the cottage. I do hope that you won’t mind—”

“Miss Donnegan,” he said again.

“It won’t be long,” she assured him. She did not seem in the least aware that he’d spoken. She had come to some sort of inner resolve and was determined to make her little speech. His interruptions would only serve to prolong it since she was not listening to a word he said. “Just until the summer. If you could give me until then, I would be most grateful. I know it’s a great deal to ask, but I really do need to stay on the island—in Burn Cottage—until—”

She fell abruptly silent as he lifted a finger and laid it firmly across her lips.

“Shh,” he said, in a tone he hoped she would find soothing. “I understand. Take all the time you need. I’ll find alternative lodgings, never fear.”

Her eyes crossed as she scowled down at the finger he was pressing over her warm, curiously vibrant mouth. It occurred to him suddenly that this was a mouth he wouldn’t have minded feeling against other parts of his body, as well. It was a rather exciting thought.

“Dr. Stanton,” she said.

“No more,” he said, pressing down harder. “I told you, I am perfectly—”

She reached up and snatched his finger away from her face in a grip that, truth be told, rather hurt.

It hurt a good deal more a second later when she twisted his wrist in a manner that sent pain shooting up and down his arm. In his shock, he dropped her hand.

“Miss Donnegal!” he cried.

She brought that warm, vibrant mouth to within an inch of his ear and whispered, “Don’t ever do that again.”

Then she released him.

He straightened and rubbed his wrist where she’d twisted it. Good Lord! Glendenning had been right after all:

She really was a madwoman!

Fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately, Reilly wasn’t at all certain which—the door to the battlements opened behind them, and Lord Glendenning appeared. He looked notably relieved when he spotted them.

“Oh,” he said. “There you are. I wondered where you’d gone off to. But I ought to have known. Brenna comes up here whenever she gets the chance.”

His words were uttered in a voice that was warm with affection, and the look he gave Brenna Donnegal, as he uttered them, was quite as heated as any Reilly had ever seen. Reilly could not help wondering if Iain MacLeod had ever been the recipient of that painful arm twist Brenna had given him, and if so, how he could continue to look at her in such a besotted manner.

“If Flora seems all right to you, my lord,” Miss Donnegal said, very briskly indeed, “I’ll be on my way.”

Lord Glendenning looked taken aback. He said, “Well, she’s right enough, I suppose, but you needna go, Brenna. Cook’s putting together a luncheon, cold meats and whatnot. I thought you and the doctor here—”

“No,” Brenna said. “I’m afraid I can’t. But Dr. Stanton would love to stay, I’m sure.”

Reilly began immediately to stammer an excuse, then realized he hadn’t one: he hadn’t any other prospects of lunch, and nowhere to go, having no room to stay in, and nothing to do, having no patients as yet, save the two in the castle’s bowels.

“Splendid!” Lord Glendenning cried, clapping him on the back. “And after luncheon, we’ll go down to the village to have a look at your dispensary.”

Reilly cast Brenna a baleful glare, but she only turned her back on him with a quick, “I’ll just check on Flora one last time and be gone, then.”

And true to her word, she disappeared a second later, slipping through the doorway from which the earl had just come, leaving Reilly to wonder if he was a bigger fool than Glendenning. After all, he’d quite fallen for her helpless maiden act, assuring her that she could stay in the cottage—*his* cottage—for as long as she liked. When all along, she wasn’t in the least bit helpless. No, Brenna Donnegan was clearly a woman who could take care of herself.

It was Reilly Stanton, in fact, who was beginning to think he could use a little help.



For the second time in twenty-four hours, Reilly Stanton was wakened from a dead sleep, and very roughly indeed.

And by the same hand, he realized, after a moment.

“Come on, Stanton,” the earl said, impatiently. “We havena all night.”

Reilly peered out of the pile of blankets in which he had wrapped himself, blinking in the candlelight, perfectly confused. He couldn’t think, for a few moments, where he was.

Then all at once he remembered. He was staying at Castle Glendenning because he had refused to allow the earl to force Brenna Donnegal out of Burn Cottage, and there were no rooms to let—that he would consider staying in—anywhere else in the village.

The dispensary, which Reilly had hoped might prove livable, would need a thorough cleaning, a few coats of paint, and a visit from the local chimney sweep before the damp could be driven permanently from its walls, and he’d be able to live there under anything like tolerable conditions.

Still, even the dispensary, dank with the smell of brine though it was, might have been preferable to the accommodations he ended up accepting from the earl. The room to which he’d been shown was large, it was true. But it was also markedly cold. The fire in the hearth did nothing, as far as he could tell, to dispel the chill, and he’d been forced, as he’d sat scribbling out a few letters to his mother and sisters, to trim the fingers off his gloves and don a hat and scarf as he sat hunched at the enormous desk in one corner, like a poor, put-upon secretary in a play.

Christine would have been stunned by his determination. Indecisive? He? Never!

Still, what choice had he had? It was either that or join Glendenning in his miserable hall, where the earl sat with all of those cursed smelly hounds, polishing that equally cursed sword. Well, Reilly had better things to do, thank you very much, than sit around and watch an earl scratch himself and admire his own reflection in the family blade.

The letters admittedly had not been that well written—it was damned hard to write in gloves, he discovered, even ones with the fingertips cut off—but they were done, and sat in a neat stack, waiting to be delivered to the post. There was even one for Pearson and Shelley, telling them all about his

adventures so far on Skye, leaving out no detail, including Brenna Donnegan's trousers.

But just because he'd spent the evening doing nothing more taxing than writing a few letters didn't mean Reilly wasn't tired . . . bone tired, as a matter of fact. Maybe it was the bracing salt air. Or maybe it was the foul dampness of the castle walls. Whatever it was, he had tumbled into the massive four-poster with its rotting bed curtains and gone straight to sleep. He was not at all happy about having been wakened a few hours later, in what appeared to be the dead of night, by his host.

"Sod off," Reilly grunted, as he wrenched the ends of his blanket out of the earl's meaty fists. In his drowsy state, he forgot that Glendenning was his employer, and that his employer was not in the least aware that he was rudely waking the eighth Marquis of Stillworth.

But Lord Glendenning, fully dressed, and in enough layers to make it clear that he intended to go outdoors—though the castle was very nearly as chilly indoors as it was without—took no offense, saying only, "Move your lazy carcass, Stanton. That is, if you want to see proof of Miss Donnegan's insanity."

That got him. Reilly didn't exactly leap from the bed, but he did stop trying to crawl back beneath the covers.

"I beg your pardon," he said, in a voice that was rough with sleep.

"You heard me." Glendenning reached for Reilly's breeches, which were lying across a nearby chair. "Put these on and get your coat. There's a full moon tonight, which means Brenna'll be up to her tricks in the cemetery, you'll see."

Glendenning dropped the clothing on the bed, and turned away, taking the candle with him. "Not mentally incompetent," the earl muttered to himself, as he crossed over to the fire, which lay in embers upon the hearth. "Ha!"

This remark, Reilly knew, referred to Reilly's assertion at luncheon that there was nothing ailing Brenna Donnegan's mental health other than a certain natural contrariness . . . an assertion the earl had not taken with good grace. He had, in fact, accused the doctor of having fallen for the girl's charms himself.

"She's like that," he'd declared, thrusting a finger at Reilly over his roast beef. "She draws you in. But she isn't all there, I'm telling you. Not in the head."

Reilly had laid down his fork and said, a little impatiently, "Just because the woman doesn't want to marry you, Glendenning, doesn't mean she's ready for Bedlam."

But the earl had only muttered darkly into his ale, "You'll see. I'll show you. You'll see for yourself."

Reilly had only shaken his head. It was clear *someone* in Lymington wasn't quite right in the head, but

he was willing to place money on the fact that that someone wasn't Brenna Donnegan.

And finding that someone in his bedroom at two o'clock in the morning, declaring that they were making a trip to the cemetery, only confirmed his suspicions. Still, Glendenning was his host and employer, and except for this one particular, seemed relatively sane in every other respect. Sighing, Reilly swung from his warm bed and slipped into his clothes.

A half hour later, as he crouched behind the church wall, shivering like a dog and wishing heartily that he'd never left London, where he was never called upon to sit in cemeteries in the dead of night, Reilly wondered whether his estimation of the earl's sanity had really been all that accurate. The man had dragged him outside on what had to be the coldest night of the year, and yet he didn't seem a bit uncomfortable for all he was wearing a kilt and, like Reilly, was sitting with his ass in a pile of snow. If it hadn't been for his sipping now and then from a flask he'd drawn out from beneath his cloak—a flask he'd offered to Reilly and from which Reilly had eagerly drunk, though the whisky in it had done little to dispel his chill—Reilly would have quite doubted the earl's humanity.

For Glendenning wasn't shivering. Glendenning didn't even appear tired. He sat quite still, gazing at the tombstones before them, at the long shadows they cast against the snow, in the brightness of the moon. Was the earl, Reilly couldn't help wondering after a while, one of those bloodsucking German specters Pearson had told him about? They were supposedly impervious to temperature. Had Glendenning got him out here so he could bite his neck and drain him of his lifeblood?

It didn't seem likely. He could have sucked Reilly's blood much more conveniently back inside the castle. What's more, vampires, at least according to Pearson, who'd told Reilly all about them, didn't shovel food into their mouths with the abandon the earl did, being rather more fastidious—and selective—about what they ate.

So Glendenning wasn't a vampire. But that didn't mean he wasn't a fool, and Reilly with him, for joining him. Really, what the *hell* were they doing in this place? Reilly wasn't a superstitious sort, and he didn't expect actually to *see* anything in this graveyard, but there was something . . . well, a bit eerie about the whole thing. Maybe it was the consummate silence, broken only now and again by the hooting of an owl. If there *was* such a thing as a vampire, Reilly was sure this graveyard housed one. Weren't they drawn toward death and plague? Well, there was certainly enough of that in Lymington. . . .

Was Brenna Donnegan a vampire? Reilly wondered. Was that what Glendenning was trying to prove? It seemed unlikely. Didn't vampires spontaneously combust in sunlight? Brenna Donnegan certainly hadn't, when he'd stood with her on the battlements that morning. In fact, she'd rather glowed, all that red hair catching hold of the sun's rays and seeming to shimmer. . . .

Glendenning startled him nearly out of his wits by reaching out and laying a hand upon his shoulder.

"Listen," he said.

Reilly, who'd been so deeply engrossed in his memory of Brenna Donnegan's hair he'd completely

forgot where he was, shook the earl's hand away and hissed, "If you do that again, old boy, I'm leaving."

"Shh," Glendenning whispered. "Do you hear that?"

Reilly listened. "You mean that owl, just then?"

"Oh. I thought—"

Reilly set his jaw. "It was just an owl."

The earl, he was convinced now, was the one in need of medical care. There was nothing here, nothing here at all, except the cold, biting, murderous cold, and the smell of woodsmoke from the fire in the vicar's bedroom. How Reilly envied that vicar! Although he imagined, this being Scotland and not England, the man wasn't properly called a vicar at all. A minister, he supposed he was. Still, while Reilly hadn't much patience for the church, he wouldn't have minded being that minister just then, warm in his bed, with maybe a plump wife to curl up against and a hot breakfast to look forward to. What had Reilly to look forward to? Not even that. The cook at Castle Glendenning had proven as talentless as she was coldhearted.

Reilly had sunk into the most abject of depressions, convinced he'd made the worst mistake of his life coming to Lyming and wondering what Christine would say if he simply walked into her parents' drawing room next week and said, "I'm sorry. You're right. This physician's business is no good. If Lady Stillworth's what you want to be called, then by all means, let's go back to Stillworth Park and be Lord and Lady Stillworth until our dying days," when Glendenning suddenly elbowed him and pointed.

Reilly followed the earl's not-very-clean finger and saw a sight that made his blood run cold—which wasn't difficult since he was so near to freezing anyway. What he saw was a hooded figure moving quickly through the tombstones. For a moment Reilly's heart sped up because he was certain that what the figure carried in one hand was a scythe.

My God, he thought. Death! I'm looking death in the face!

But as the figure grew closer, Reilly saw that he'd been mistaken, and what he'd taken to be a scythe was, in actuality, a lantern. Still, the figure would easily have passed as one of Pearson's vampires . . . if it hadn't been for the dog.

For beside the hooded figure trotted a dog Reilly recognized. It was the mutt he'd seen at Burn Cottage. Not the injured border collie, but Brenna Donnegan's dog . . . Sorcha, he thought she'd called it.

Awash with confusion, he said, "But—"

Glendenning silenced him. "Watch," he whispered.

Reilly watched. And as he watched, what he saw filled him with even more confusion. For the cloaked figure had approached a grave and, raising the lantern, stood squinting at the writing on the modest wooden marker.

“What the devil,” Reilly murmured, hardly aware he was speaking out loud.

“Dinna I tell you?” Glendenning sounded as triumphant as a man speaking under his breath could. “Dinna I? She’s barmy. Positively barmy.”

Either that, Reilly thought, or his joke about witchcraft hadn’t been very far off target. But Brenna Donnegal hadn’t struck him as a woman who was a believer in the occult. Quite the opposite, in fact. Brenna Donnegal had seemed rather firmly grounded in the everyday and practical. What in hell was she doing, tripping about a graveyard in the middle of the night?

And what was he doing, watching her at it?

This, Reilly said to himself, *is too much*, and he started to his feet.

“Hold on.” The earl reached out and seized hold of one corner of Reilly’s cloak. “Where do you think you’re going?” he demanded.

“Putting a stop to this foolishness,” Reilly said, brushing snow from the seat of his trousers. “What else?”

But he was never given the opportunity. Glendenning pulled him roughly to the ground again.

“Are you mad?” the earl demanded, *sotto voce*. “She canna know we’re here!”

Not at all happy about the way Glendenning had manhandled him—he seemed to have torn his cloak with his great meaty fingers, and it was the only one Reilly had brought with him from London—Reilly snapped, “Why not?”

Glendenning glanced over the wall, toward the tombstones. “Because she’s clearly possessed. If we wake her from the trance she’s in, it could throw her forever into the abyss of madness.” He shook his head until his long black locks swayed. “What kind of doctor are you, anyway? Do you no’ know *anything*?”

Reilly blinked at his employer in utter disbelief. “Abyss of madness?” he echoed, at length. “Abyss of madness? What rubbish. Let me up, you ignorant sod. I’m going to get an explanation out of her if I have to shake it from her—”

“She willna tell you,” Glendenning insisted, tightening his grip on Reilly’s shoulders. “Believe me, I’ve tried. She’ll just tell you to mind your own business.”

“That doesn’t sound a bit like something a possessed woman would say,” Reilly said, firmly.

“Nevertheless. Something comes over her, I tell you, when the moon is full. This is the third time I’ve caught her out here, and each time it’s the same. She goes about looking at all the grave markers, then jots some things down in a ledger, and then she goes and wanders about the village, writing more things down. Sometimes, she even picks up handfuls of dirt, and puts ’em in her pocket and carries ’em back home with her—”

Good Lord! *Dirt*? What could *that* be about? Some sort of geological obsession? Whatever was the matter with the woman?

Kneeling in the circle of light thrown by her lantern, and scribbling something with a pencil in a book she’d drawn from the depths of her cloak, Brenna Donnegan certainly did not look particularly sane. And it *was* Brenna Donnegan. He could see some of her auburn curls swaying in the moonlight and caught a glimpse of those trousers as she climbed back to her feet. A second later, the ledger had disappeared and she was looking about, presumably for the dog.

Who, Reilly saw too late, had discovered them and was grinning at them over the wall, her tail wagging in a friendly manner.

“Go away,” the earl hissed at the dog. “Go on. Go!”

The dog paid not the slightest heed to the earl. Instead, she jumped up, resting her front paws on the wall and licked Reilly in the face.

“Get out of here,” Glendenning hissed, ducking. “Go on. Get!”

The dog grinned at them. She only left when a twig snapped beneath her mistress’s foot, and it became apparent that Brenna was leaving the cemetery. Sorcha whirled around and raced after the retreating figure, her flying paws soundless on the snow.

Glendenning heaved a sigh of relief. “There,” he said, in his normal speaking voice, when both dog and owner had disappeared from sight. “I told you. Now she’ll go roam about the village for a while, then head home. She’s completely daft, that one.”

Reilly got up, and this time Glendenning didn’t try to stop him.

“I’m certain,” Reilly said, as he brushed snow and twigs from his cloak, “there’s a perfectly rational reason behind her behavior.”

There had to be. There simply had to.

“Right,” Glendenning said. He, too, had climbed to his feet, his joints popping in protest. “She’s possessed.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Reilly said. He went to the low stone wall behind which they’d been crouching

and swung neatly over it.

“Well, if she isna possessed—” Glendenning followed him slowly, which led Reilly to think perhaps the earl hadn’t been quite as comfortable down there in the snow as he’d let on. “—then whyever does she do it?”

Reilly had crossed the cemetery until he came to stand beside the grave Brenna had knelt before. The marker was nothing more than a board, with a good half dozen names scrawled upon it. All the persons buried there had apparently died upon the same date: August 4, 1846.

“Did you know any of these people?” Reilly asked, pointing to the writing on the marker when the earl had caught up to him.

Glendenning grunted thoughtfully. “One or two,” he said. “Bairns, mostly, from the looks of it. But children—and old folks—were the ones who got took with it. The cholera, I mean. Toward the end, we had so many people dying a day, we had to start burying ’em one on top the other, five or six to a grave. It was either that, or put ’em in unconsecrated ground, and no one wanted that. Werena even given the benefit of a coffin, poor blighters. Coffin maker went, too, and we had to chuck ’em in wrapped in the bed linens they’d died on. Only buried deep enough to keep the dogs from gettin’ at ’em, since we were in such a hurry to get ’em under before they started rottin’—”

“Good God,” Reilly breathed.

He had known, of course. It had been this bad in London—or so he’d heard. He had not, of course, ventured into the communities worst stricken during last summer’s plague . . . no one he knew had.

And if they were forced to, it had always been with a silk kerchief over their nose, to keep from breathing the foul miasma that spread the horrifying, foreign disease.

Still, he had heard stories of mass graves, of horse carts bearing the dead, of whole families wiped out. . . .

But he had never seen the evidence of it.

He recalled with a pang Brenna’s accusation, that the Royal College of Physicians was filled with men who cared nothing for the treatment of disease, only for the advancement of their own careers. And it was true, he thought. None of his colleagues—much less himself—had given a thought to the plague ravaging London’s poorest neighborhoods. It wasn’t as if any of their own patients were being affected by it. Cholera, for Reilly and his peers, had always been a disease that struck others, not themselves.

“We,” he said. Reilly had to stop and clear his throat. “What do you mean, when you say ‘we’? You mean you helped with the burials?”

He found it hard to believe that an earl—particularly *this* earl—would ever stoop to doing

something so . . . menial.

“Aye,” was Glendenning’s surprising answer. “We all did. Everyone leant a hand. Even Brenna’s mother, Mrs. Donnegal, took a turn, and she was but a slip of a woman.”

Good Lord. Lord Glendenning, Brenna had assured him, was not like any other peers she’d known. Well, he wasn’t like any other peers Reilly had known, either—loathe as he was to admit anything good about the man. Lord Glendenning, it appeared, cared more for his people than most of the men in the House of Lords, whose job it was—ostensibly—to care for the people.

Reilly shook his head. There were other markers—many others—just like the one in front of him. How many residents of the village of Lyming had been thrust into these haphazard graves? It didn’t seem right.

It didn’t, of course, excuse the odd behavior he’d witnessed tonight. But it wasn’t right.

“What do you think of it, then?” Glendenning asked.

Reilly, shaken from his own private thoughts, looked up. “Think of what?”

“The girl.” Even in the moonlight, Reilly could read the earl’s impatience. “What do you make of it, her writing down the names of the dead like that? And picking up bits of dirt in the village.”

There was only one reply that Reilly could give, and he gave it. “I can’t say.”

Glendenning glared down at him. “What do you mean, you canna say? I would think it’s clear enough. The woman’s mad.”

Reilly tried to think. It was difficult, given his degree of exhaustion, the amount of liquor he’d consumed, and the severe cold. Still, he tried.

And he didn’t like what he came up with.

It wasn’t only that the woman had stood in a graveyard in the middle of the night, writing down the names of the dead. It wasn’t that she wandered about the village, again in the dead of night, collecting dirt. There was something else troubling him, as well. And that was something he’d discovered down in the village dispensary:

The medical equipment was missing.

Oh, not the supplies. There were bandages and unguents and ointments aplenty.

But where clearly a microscope had once sat was only a tabletop, gathering dust, the only slides to be seen were broken ones. Certain vials of chemicals were gone from the shelves.

Oddest of all, there wasn’t a patient file to be found anywhere in the place.

He did not think it was because Brenna's father had not kept patient files, either.

But what could have happened to them?

Thieves? Maybe. But there'd been no sign of forced entry, and Glendenning swore he had the only key. And what would thieves want with medical files?

He'd have to start all new ones, and from scratch.

A microscope was easily replaceable—for Reilly, anyway. He'd merely send for a new one and have the charge sent to his bank. Slides and chemicals, too.

What troubled him was why they'd been removed. For what purpose? Why couldn't he keep himself from thinking that it could not be an innocent one?

Because he was fairly certain he knew who'd removed them. What frightened him—yes, *frightened* him—was why.

Women had no business—no business at all—mucking about with such things.

“You said something,” Reilly said to the earl, “about Miss Donnegan keeping a locked room at the cottage.”

“Aye,” Glendenning said. “Not a lock on the island but the one at the dispensary, and the one on the door to her father's study, or so she calls it. Why?”

“No reason,” Reilly said thoughtfully.

Glendenning wasn't the cleverest of blokes, but he wasn't stupid, either. In a second, he had hold of Reilly's shoulders, and had spun him about to face him.

“Tell me, Stanton,” he said, his deep voice, which normally sounded like distant thunder, seeming quieter somehow in the frigid night air. “You canna keep it from me, whatever it is. I can tell by your silence you think something's . . . no' right. Is she . . . is she really gone? Is that it?”

Reilly looked the earl dead in the eye. He said evenly, “Let go of me.”

Glendenning released him, then strode a few feet away. A second later, he strode back, and Reilly could see in the moonlight that the earl's expression was livid with rage. “You'd better come out with it and right now! You know something, something more you're not telling me. Well, you had just better let loose with it, or you'll find yourself spitting up teeth, my friend.”

Reilly could take quite a lot. He could take being dropped by the love of his life because she thought him a wastrel and a bounder, who had a perfectly good title but refused to use it. He could take abandoning everything, everything he had ever known, and starting over again in a backward

town like Lyming in order to prove to her that she'd been wrong—he was neither a wastrel nor a bounder, and if she'd truly loved him, whether she was called Mrs. Stanton or Lady Stillworth ought not to have mattered to her. He could take diving into icy saltwater after drowning ferrymen, and he could take supervising the breech birth of the local tavern wench's bastard. He could even take being wakened in the middle of the night by a love-smitten earl.

But one thing he would not, could not take was being threatened. He turned on Iain MacLeod, and turned on him with raised fists.

“You try it,” he snarled. “Come on and try it, Glendenning.”

The earl looked a good deal taken aback. He blinked at the fist Reilly held clenched before his eyes and said, “See here, now, Stanton. What's this? I didna mean anything, you know. No need to be so defensive. . . .”

Reilly, realizing he'd gone a bit too far, lowered his fists. He could not, however, do anything about his racing heart, or the hair that had gone up at the back of his neck.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No.” Glendenning eyed him cautiously as one might eye a mad dog. He said, “No, I'm the sorry one, all right.” And then, as the two of them stood there, their breath turning to puffs of white steam as they panted, Glendenning said quietly, “So, tell me, then. I can take it. Which is it? Possession? Or witchcraft?”

An owl hooted just as Glendenning uttered the word witchcraft. Reilly couldn't help heaving a little shudder. “Neither,” he said, reaching up to clutch his cloak more tightly about his shoulders.

Glendenning's own shoulders slumped. “That's it, then,” he said mournfully. “Well, I suppose I always knew it. It never did seem natural, her no' wanting anything to do with me. Every other woman I ever met . . . well, at least this explains it.”

Reilly looked at him questioningly, and Glendenning said, “Oh, dunna play games with me. She's mad as a March hare, and you know it. No sense trying to be kind about it.”

But Reilly hadn't been trying to be kind. Well, at least not consciously. He thought about Pearson and his contessa, and how excited he had been at the prospect of having his own madwoman about whom to write. Fool. That's what he was. A gadabout and a fool. What did he know about madness? What did he know about anything? He was just like those men Brenna had spoken of so scornfully, those peers in the Royal College of Physicians. Titled know-nothings who wanted to puff up their own sense of self-importance. . . .

Glendenning's deep voice broke into these glum musings. “What do you think we ought to do, then? Is she a danger to herself?”

“I wouldn’t say so.” Reilly sighed. “At least . . . well, I suppose it depends on what we find in that room.”

“What room?” the earl demanded.

“The locked one. The one in her cottage.”

The earl snorted. “Och, you’ll never be getting in there. She guards it like the crown jewels were inside.”

Reilly reflected upon this. “What about these relations? The ones her parents shipped her off to?”

“Aye,” Glendenning said. “The uncle, who might or might not be a peer. What about him, then?”

“I think,” Reilly murmured, “I had better write to him. . . .”

“What good’s *that* going to do?” Glendenning wanted to know. “He’s only going to drag her back to London.”

“Where she belongs,” Reilly declared. “Someone’s got to look after her. She’s clearly up to something, something she doesn’t want the rest of us to know, which means it can’t be good for her. . . .”

Glendenning’s voice rose to a complaining bleat. “I told you, *I’ll* take care of her. There’s no need to write to this uncle of hers. You just convince her that, in your medical opinion, she hadna ought to live alone, and I’ll do the rest—”

Disgusted, Reilly said, “Glendenning, if she really is mad, you can’t marry her.”

“Why no’? Is there a law against it?”

“Most likely. But even if there weren’t, do you really want a woman who lurks about graveyards in the middle of the night to be the mother of your children?”

Glendenning thrust out his chin. “My father always insisted my mother wasna right in the head, and I turned out all right.”

That, Reilly longed to point out, was merely a matter of opinion. Instead, he said, rather more charitably than he felt, “I don’t doubt it. I’ll go to see Miss Donnegal in the morning, and see if she has any sort of believable explanation.”

A look of joy spread across the earl’s face. He said, sounding immensely satisfied, “All right, then.”

Then, apparently noticing that Reilly didn’t look very enthusiastic at the prospect, Glendenning threw an arm about his shoulders and said kindly, “Dunna look so glum, Stanton. It’ll all turn out for

the best. I'll get the wife I want, and you'll get your cottage, and we'll all be happy."

Reilly very much doubted that.



Brenna Donnegan smoothed the gold satin of her skirt and looked up through her eyelashes at the young man who stood before her.

“Well,” she said, feigning indecisiveness. “I just don’t know. . . .”

“Please, Miss Donnegan.” The young man was really quite handsome in his velvet coat and breeches. “You did say you’d save this last dance for me.”

“Hmmm . . .” Brenna had every intention of dancing with the gentleman, but it wouldn’t do, she knew, to let him know that. Young men needed to be kept guessing as to the true nature of a lady’s feelings for them. Everyone knew that. Uncertainty over where they stood in a girl’s affections was what kept them from losing interest.

“Well,” Brenna began to say, in her most flirtatious voice. “I *suppose*—”

She was interrupted, however, by another young gentleman, this one even more handsome than the last, with his immense breadth of shoulder, laughing dark eyes, and his soft brown hair, which he wore tied back with a bit of leather cord.

“You said you’d save this last dance for *me*,” he said. And then he held out his hand.

And Brenna, to her horror, found herself taking that hand and rising from her seat, allowing Dr. Stanton—for it was Reilly Stanton, and Reilly Stanton alone, who possessed such merrily twinkling eyes, and who wore his hair in so casual a manner, yet looked so incredibly handsome in spite of it—to lead her to the dance floor.

It wasn’t until the orchestra in one corner of the grand ballroom launched into a waltz that Brenna realized they were not, as she’d supposed, about to take part in a reel. Brenna felt a moment of complete panic. She had never been particularly good at waltzing. The tallest girl in her class, Brenna had always been forced by the school dance instructor to play the part of “the gentleman,” and accordingly, she hadn’t the slightest idea how to follow. Her few experiences dancing the waltz with a male partner had each ended in disaster, with either bruised knees, swollen toes, or bitter words, and sometimes all three.

She looked up into Reilly Stanton’s warm brown eyes, and saw the good-natured humor there. I’ll

tell him, she decided. He looks as if he'll understand.

But then his arm went around her waist, and she felt the heat from his lean, hard body, and she thought, Oh. I could learn to like that.

And then a wave of lavender-scented soap washed over her, such a clean and pleasing odor that Brenna actually closed her eyes, to enjoy it more fully. Oh, she thought. I never knew a man could actually smell *good*.

And then the music swelled, and Reilly Stanton stepped forward, and Brenna, not in the least aware of what she was doing, stepped forward at the same time.

Bang! Their knees collided painfully through the thick layers of material that made up her skirt and petticoats. . . .

Brenna woke with a start and lay perfectly still for a moment, until the familiar sight of the raw wooden roof beams that made up her bedroom ceiling came slowly into focus.

Good God, she thought. A dream. That's all it had been. A dream.

A *nightmare*, more like it. The last time she'd been anywhere near a ballroom had been two months ago. That was the night she'd pretended to receive a letter from her aunt, informing her of the illness of her uncle. "I must," Brenna had sadly informed her hostess, Mrs. Bartlett, "return to London at once. . . ."

And she'd taken the next available post chaise to Edinburgh, and from there, back to Skye.

Only Mary knew the truth. And Mary, who thought it all a thrilling adventure, would never tell. She faithfully forwarded all the letters that came to Brenna at the Bartletts' house in Bath, screening from her parents the truth of her young friend's whereabouts. A truer friend Brenna could not have hoped to make—especially considering where the two girls had met, at Miss Laver's London Seminary for Young Ladies, a school they'd both steadfastly despised. Brenna had not cared much for the subjects Miss Laver considered crucial for the modern young lady—painting and dance—though she had got on well enough with the other girls. Sweet girls, really, whose only goals had been to secure a rich and, less importantly, handsome husband. Mary had been the only one with a spark of originality—and a sense of mischief—which had been why the two of them had got on so well. Brenna had never really fit in at school, nor in any of the London ballrooms to which she'd been dragged to afterward by her well-meaning aunt and uncle.

Now a ballroom was the last place anyone would find Brenna Donnegan. And she liked it just fine that way.

So what on earth was she doing, dreaming about one? Much less worrying about waltzing—waltzing with *Reilly Stanton*—when there were so many more important, pressing things to worry about?

And then the banging sound that in Brenna's dream had been her knee colliding with the new physician's sounded again, and Brenna realized someone was knocking on her cottage door.

She rolled over and glanced at the small clock on her bedside table. Eight in the morning. It was eight in the morning, and someone was already knocking on her door. She flopped back down against the pillows. What was *wrong* with these people? Hadn't they heard? There was a new doctor in town. What in heaven's name were they doing, knocking on *her* door?

Loathe to leave the warm nest of quilts in which she was curled, Brenna called in a sleep-roughened voice, "Just a moment!"

But the person at the door evidently did not hear her since the knocking only increased in volume, causing Sorch, who lay on the bed between Brenna and a drowsy-eyed Eiric, to leap up and begin barking.

Brenna, who hadn't had that much sleep to begin with, groaned and reached for her shawl. Why, she wondered. Why *her*, and not the capable young Dr. Stanton? Surely everyone had heard of his arrival by now. Lyming was an extremely small village. It wasn't fair. *He* hadn't been up all night, like she had. *He* had undoubtedly spent a warm and comfortable night in one of Castle Glendenning's many guest rooms. Then, remembering her last trip to the castle, Brenna amended that thought: comfortable, possibly, but never warm. Warm was about the last thing anyone would call Castle Glendenning—

More loud knocking.

"I'm *coming*," Brenna said, flinging the shawl around her shoulders. She stood up, shuddering at the chill, and jammed her feet into the threadbare slippers she kept beneath her bed. The entire time she did this, the knocking continued without ceasing.

"My God," Brenna muttered. "Someone had better be dying."

She stomped across the bedroom, Sorch darting excitedly all around her legs, making her progress toward the front door that much slower. The knocking continued.

"Could you—" Reaching the door, she began to struggle with the wooden board with which she barred it every night. "—please stop—" She managed to lift the heavy plank. "—that banging?"

She threw open the door. It was with a good deal of astonishment that she saw not one of the villagers standing there in the snow, but Reilly Stanton, looking very much as if he'd had as little sleep as she had.

"You!" she cried, recalling with a blush her idiotic dream. "What do you—"

But before she'd even finished, he'd pushed past her, quite rudely, and strode into the room.

“Don’t play games with me.” Reilly Stanton spun around as he reached the door to the cottage’s spare room, the one Brenna’s father had called his study. “I’ve been up all night, going over it in my head. But try as I might, I can’t think of a single rational reason why you’d go about, recording the names off grave markers in the middle of the night, then scoop up bits of dirt from outside various villagers’ homes. Glendenning thinks you’re mad, and I’m inclined to agree with him. Except . . . except that I can’t, damn it.”

Brenna, her eyebrows raised as far as they would go, closed the cottage door and leaned her back upon it, regarding him with her arms folded across her chest.

“Well,” she said. “And a good morning to you, too, Dr. Stanton.”

“I told you not to play games, Miss Donnegal,” Reilly snapped. “This may seem amusing to you, but I assure you, it wasn’t very amusing sitting out in that graveyard half the night, freezing my . . .” He glanced resentfully in her direction. “Freezing my *feet* off.”

Brenna said, “I’m not the one who made you sit there. What are you shouting at *me* for?”

“Because, as you well know, Glendenning’s so head over heels in love with you, you’re all he can think about. He dragged me over to the churchyard and forced me to sit there and watch that little performance of yours.” Reilly was pacing up and down the width of the room, apparently oblivious to the fact that above his head, Brenna’s crow was following his every move, hopping from rafter to rafter in a flurry of black feathers.

“And I sat up all night, trying to convince myself that he was right, that you must be mad, because that’s the only explanation that makes any sort of sense at all. Except—” He stopped suddenly, and turned to face her, the long table, surrounded by chairs, all that separated them. “Except that you *aren’t* mad. You can’t be mad. A madwoman couldn’t have delivered that baby yesterday. I don’t care what anyone says. So if you aren’t mad, Miss Donnegal, then just what in the hell were you doing last night?”

Brenna cocked her head so that all her red-gold hair, which she’d not yet had an opportunity to brush that morning, fell to one side of her face. “Would you care for some tea, Dr. Stanton?”

“Tea?” He choked. “*Tea*, did you say? *Would I care for some tea?* Is that what you said?” Reilly Stanton, who had struck Brenna as the most even tempered of men, looked ready to explode. A vein she’d never noticed before throbbed in the middle of his forehead, and his gentle brown eyes flashed with some rather ungente—in fact, downright dangerous looking—lights.

“Is that what you said, Miss Donnegal?” he demanded. “*Tea?* I ask you a perfectly legitimate question, and you counter it by asking me if I’d like some tea?”

Brenna unfolded her arms and moved away from the door. There was quite an icy breeze blowing in from beneath it. She went to the fire, which had very nearly gone out overnight.

“You must be frozen through,” she said, taking down an iron poker, and stirring up the embers. “I would think tea would be most welcome.”

“What I would welcome,” Reilly said, in tones of extreme exasperation, “is an explanation.”

“Well,” Brenna said, as she checked the tea kettle, “seeing as I have no idea what you’re talking about, you’re not going to get one, so you might as well have some tea.”

Looking quite disgusted, Reilly Stanton pulled a chair out from beneath the table and sank down into it. “Why,” he asked, seeming to be speaking to himself, “did I ever even come here?”

Brenna wasn’t certain whether he meant her cottage or Lyming. Feeling a bit sorry for him, she asked, “Have you had any breakfast? I’m sure there’s an egg or two somewhere. . . .”

“I don’t want eggs.” Reilly brought his fist down hard upon the tabletop. “I want to know what you think you’re up to. Are you trying to convince the earl that you’re mad? If you are, it won’t work. He’s fully prepared to marry you anyway.”

The fire stoked, and the tea kettle warming over it, Brenna went to the larder door. “Simply because,” she tossed back, over her shoulder, “I’m the only woman—”

“—on the island that he hasn’t had,” Reilly finished for her. “Yes, yes, you’ve told me all about your theory on the matter. But really, Miss Donnegal, do you think you’re going about it the right way, with this cloak and dagger business? I don’t want to alarm you, but lurking about the graves of cholera victims is dangerous business. The contagion could very well be released back into the air, you know.”

She didn’t even look at him as she closed the larder door again with her foot, a loaf of bread, a pot of butter, and a jar of jam balanced precariously in her arms, and said, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not. Not to be offensive, but however much of a physician you might fancy yourself, you haven’t exactly received the sort of education I have, and I’m telling you, Miss Donnegal, that you could seriously endanger not just your own life, but the lives of everyone in the entire village.”

Brenna felt her cheeks growing hot. What was it about this man that enraged her so quickly—and so thoroughly? She’d been quite ashamed of her fit of temper the day before when she’d wrenched his finger from her lips. But she hadn’t been able to help herself. Ridiculous, wasn’t it, that the mere touch of a man’s finger should affect her so?

But there it was.

She managed to keep her fury in check this time, however, as she lowered the breakfast things onto the table and replied, “I know you consider yourself a great authority on the subject of cholera. I’m perfectly conscious of the fact that you came all the way from London to dazzle us with your

expertise, and that, as a proper country peasant, I ought to be grateful for your illuminating advice. But I find I must take exception with your theory that my entering a cemetery is going to release a wave of cholera back into the community. I am afraid I do not agree with your colleagues' sentiment that cholera is caused by a miasma, like typhoid or scarletina."

Reilly seemed not to hear her. He was looking about the cottage in an irritated manner.

"It isn't right," he declared, finally.

She nodded as she carefully cut a slice of bread from the loaf. "I know. It's quite daring of me to contradict the medical establishment. But I do think—"

"Not that," he said scornfully, as if irritated with her for not following the pattern of his private thoughts. "This. That you should live here, all alone. It isn't right."

Brenna glanced about the cottage. "Well, I don't use my parents' room, it's true, or the one belonging to my brothers, but I don't think I ought to be condemned for letting unused space go to waste—"

He glared at her. "You know what I'm talking about, Miss Donnegan. A young woman, such as yourself, oughtn't live alone. Or entertain male callers without there being a proper chaperone nearby. I can't imagine your parents would like this at all, if they knew."

Brenna didn't suppose they would. Then again, it had always been the work that was most important, and she liked to think that when they found out what she'd been up to, they would understand that she'd merely been doing what she thought she had to, in order to prove her theory. . . .

"The earl says you've an uncle," Reilly Stanton went on. "And that your parents left you in his care when they went to India. . . ."

Brenna began to see that the new physician was going to interfere with her work in more ways than one. A bit of subterfuge might prove necessary. She began to butter the bread she'd sliced for him.

"Oh," she said, with a sigh. "Yes, they did."

"Well?" The doctor sounded very indignant indeed. "And what does your uncle have to say, then, about your coming back to Skye like this?"

"He doesn't like it at all," Brenna said. "But I can't go back to him, you see."

"I jolly well do not see," Reilly said. He took the buttered slice of bread she offered him, and began to plunk jam onto it from the jar at his elbow.

"You don't understand. I really can't go back."

"Why not?" He passed her the slice of bread he'd jellied. "Here, take this. And don't try telling me

you ran off because he beats you. I'm not as gullible as I look. I'm convinced any man who tried to beat you would end up the worst for his efforts."

Brenna scowled at the slice of bread before her. For she'd been fully prepared to foully besmirch her uncle's good name by telling the doctor just such a falsehood.

"Why don't you simply," Dr. Stanton went on, "tell me what it is that's brought you back to Skye? That might help matters, don't you think?"

She glared at him. "Why? So you can patronize me a bit more?"

"Patronize you? Tisk tisk. I am speaking to you as one rational being to another. How is that patronizing?"

"You've no right," she said, her eyes flashing, "to put your nose in my business."

"That's where you're wrong. Where your business overlaps my business, I've every right. Water's ready."

The pot over the fire began to sing.

Brenna, still scowling, got up to tend to the kettle. Really, but he was quite the most infuriating man she'd ever met, she thought to herself. There he was, after what had been a clearly sleepless night, his jaw dark with unshaved whiskers, his eyelids smudged with purple shadow, and his frustration with her obviously extreme. And yet all he seemed capable of doing was worry himself over her concerns. And it wasn't, she felt almost certain, out of any sort of professional jealousy. He did not in the least resent her position in the community, or in the cottage he was to have. He seemed genuinely to want to help her.

And, from what she knew about London physicians, this was unusual in the extreme.

"There," she said, not very politely, as she poured him a cup of tea. "Do you take sugar?"

"Just milk, if you have any."

"Of course." She poured some into his cup, and handed it to him. "There you are."

"Thank you." He sipped without seeming to taste the brew at all. "I suppose, then, since you refuse to do the sensible thing and go back to your relations, we'll need to concentrate our efforts on finding a nice widow who might be induced to move in with you."

Brenna, pouring milk into her own cup, was so surprised by the remark that she accidentally spilled half of what she'd intended to go into her tea onto the table.

"I beg your pardon?"

“I think a widow would be a suitable chaperone,” Dr. Stanton said. “I first considered one of the girls from Mrs. Murphy’s establishment, but as you know, they aren’t . . . well, they don’t seem to have the most untarnished reputations. So then I thought there must be a widow or two about who could stay with you, so you won’t be so entirely alone.”

This, Brenna thought, was going entirely too far.

“A widow?” she cried. “To serve as my chaperone? Oh, Dr. Stanton, that’s hardly—I mean, I do *not* need a chaperone. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself—”

“As you have amply proven. However, I can’t help noticing that the Earl of Glendenning has some less than honorable feelings for you. You’ve already had occasion once to blacken his eye. I don’t wish to see that happen again—”

“Yes,” Brenna said, beginning to feel as if she were standing on a cliff and the ground was slowly slipping out from beneath her feet, “but a chaperone isn’t going to prevent that—”

“I believe it will.” He blinked at her. His dark eyes, which she’d thought so filled with light and laughter, seemed to be mocking her now. “Don’t look like that about it, Miss Donnegal. It really is the proper way to go about doing things.”

“It won’t do,” she said. “It won’t do at all, and I won’t have it.”

“Miss Donnegal, it’s for your own good. If the people of this village won’t look out for the best interests of one of their own, I’ll have to do it—”

She burst out laughing, though in truth, she didn’t see anything particularly funny about the situation.

“You?” She shook her head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Why, you only arrived the day before yesterday. You don’t know anything about my best interests, or anyone else’s for that matter.”

Reilly Stanton, much to her annoyance, merely ignored her.

“You cannot,” he said calmly, “continue here as you have done. It isn’t proper, and it isn’t right. You’re much too isolated here by the burn. Anything might happen to you. Have you even a charwoman? Someone, at the very least, to do the washing up?”

Brenna stammered, “Why, yes, yes, I do—not that it’s any of your business.”

“Who hauls water for you?”

She bristled. “I haul my own, from the—”

“Burn, of course. And your firewood?”

“I get by—”

“You get by. Well, that might be good enough for the folk here in Lyming, but it’s not good enough for me.”

His dark eyes flashed. Reilly Stanton looked determined. Unfortunately, a look of determination became him. What was it about this man that she found so appealing, that he’d begun slipping into her dreams at night? Apart from his good looks and sense of humor—and the fact that he observed proper hygiene—he was no different, really, from any other man Brenna had ever known.

Well, except for this absurd chivalrousness . . .

“It’s going to have to be,” Brenna declared. “Don’t think, Dr. Stanton, that just because you’ve accepted a position once held by my father, that you can simply step into his shoes. You’re not my father, so you can’t tell me how to live my life, anymore than you can tell me how best to conduct my research—”

“I knew it,” he declared, springing to his feet and thrusting an accusing finger at her. “That is what you were doing, prowling around the churchyard after dark. *Research*.”

Brenna felt her cheeks begin to burn once more. She said, with a certain amount of haughtiness, “Of course not. That isn’t what I meant to say. What I meant was—”

“And the dirt.” He looked as pleased as if he’d just stumbled across the goose that laid the golden eggs. “Soil samples. Of course. I ought to have known.” Reilly Stanton began to pace again, and above their heads, Jo followed him, leaping from perch to perch. “When Glendenning took me down to the dispensary, I noticed your father’s microscope was missing. He thought one of the villagers must have broken in and stolen it—hard times, and all of that. But it wasn’t one of the villagers. It was you. *You* took it. And locked it up in that room over there—the one you’ve got Glendenning convinced you perform satanic rituals in—so no one will know. The only question now, of course, is why. Why soil? I don’t understand it.”

He stopped pacing and stood, blinking down at her. He was so tall and so wide about the shoulders, he seemed a bit menacing, hanging over her like that. He thought she needed a chaperone to protect her against Lord Glendenning’s advances, but she was beginning to suspect this was not the case. It was Reilly Stanton himself she needed protection from. It wasn’t Lord Glendenning, after all, who was waltzing with her in her dreams.

“Soil,” he muttered, still staring down at her as if she were a puzzle he could solve if he looked at her long enough. “Dirt. Waste.” He snapped his fingers, then pointed at her. “Miasma. Miasma arises from putrid waste. That’s it. You’re trying to trace the source of last year’s cholera outbreak, aren’t you?”

Her jaw dropped. How had he known? How had he been able to put together what no one else in the entire village had, and after knowing her only a little more than forty-eight hours?

Well, he was, after all, a licensed member of the Royal College of Physicians. That ought, she supposed, to stand for something.

Still, she refused to acknowledge that he'd guessed correctly. She levered her jaw quickly back into place and said, careful not to look in his eyes, "Don't be daft."

"Good God!" Reilly dropped his arm. "You *are*."

"You don't know what you're talking about." She whirled away from him. "I am not trying to do any such thing."

"A cure, then. Or a vaccine. Like the one for smallpox—"

She only snorted in response.

"Don't you realize what a risk you're taking?" There was no lightness in Reilly Stanton's tone now, nor was the twinkle detectable in his dark eyes. Instead there was only concern. "Cholera's serious business, you know, Miss Donnegan. You shouldn't be mucking about with it."

Brenna shot him an aggravated look. "Did you want an egg, or not?"

Reilly said, "I don't care for one, thank you, and stop trying to change the subject. You can't know what you're up against."

Brenna flung down a spoon and spun to face him. "Why?" she demanded. "If that were what I was up to—and I'm not saying it is—why wouldn't I know what I'm up against? I think I'm a good deal more qualified to look into the matter, having lived through an outbreak of the disease, than *you* are, for instance."

He blinked down at her. "That's not why—"

"Isn't it? Then why? Because I'm a woman?"

He looked a good deal taken aback. He even stopped pacing for a moment. "I didn't say that."

"But you meant it."

"Well, you've got to admit, it's a bit . . ."

"What?"

"Well. Odd."

She laughed. She couldn't help it.

“Oh,” he said. “You find something amusing, do you?”

“Yes,” she said. “You.”

“*Me?*” He looked astonished. “How am *I* amusing?”

“You left a perfectly lucrative practice in London to come to Lyming, of all places. If that’s not *odd*, I don’t know what is.”

“As I explained to you,” he said, stiffly, “there were mitigating circumstances—”

“If you mean your fiancée, I’m sorry to tell you, I find that even odder. She dropped you, didn’t you say? So why on earth are you so intent on winning her back?”

“Winning her . . .” Reilly shook his head. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, you said it yourself yesterday at the castle. You came to Lyming to prove to her that you aren’t the wastrel she accused you of being. In my opinion, that’s a bit odder than a daughter who wants to show your precious medical community that her father’s theory about this particular disease is perfectly sound.”

Reilly stared. He seemed entirely unable to look at anything but her. This was a bit disconcerting, especially since Brenna suddenly became aware of the fact that all she had on was her nightdress, a pair of slippers, and a rather moth-eaten shawl. If the young Dr. Stanton was aware of this, however, he gave no sign: his gaze had never once wavered from her face.

“What theory?” he demanded. “What are you talking about?”

Inwardly, she cursed herself. Why, *why* had she opened her big mouth?

Outwardly, she demanded, “Why should I tell you? So that you can publish a paper of your own on the subject and take away all of his glory? I don’t think so. And now, Dr. Stanton, I think you had best go.” She stalked to the door and hauled it open, letting in the frigid morning chill. “Good morning.”

Reilly Stanton stood, still staring at her angrily. The vein in his forehead continued to throb. He was furious with her, that much she could see. Why he should be so, she could not imagine. It was none of his business, surely, how she conducted her affairs—or just what, exactly, those affairs involved.

“I’ll go,” he said, finally. A muscle, she saw, had begun to leap in his jaw, in time to the vein in his forehead. “But this isn’t the last you’ve heard from me on this subject, Miss Donnegal. I’ll be damned if I’ll stand by and watch you endanger your own life—or the lives of the people of this island—in order to prove some idiotic theory of your father’s—”

“*Get out.*” Brenna couldn’t remember feeling such white hot fury in her life. “Get out *now*.”

“Gladly,” Reilly Stanton said. And he jammed his hat onto his head and left without another glance at her.

But she wasn’t willing to allow him the last word.

“My father’s theory,” she shouted after him, “isn’t idiotic, either. And I shall prove it. You wait and see.”

But Dr. Stanton gave no sign of having heard her. Which, she supposed, was just as well. She was as happy to ignore the new physician as to be ignored by him.

She just hoped, as she slammed the door behind his departing figure, that in the future, he kept out of her dreams as well as her business.



“**I**’m sorry, ma’am,” Reilly heard himself say, for what had to be the tenth time that day alone. “But I don’t treat animals.”

The woman—Adam MacAdams’s wife, to be exact, who certainly lived up to the earl’s description of her—thrust out her plump lower lip and said, “But she hasna laid in ever so long, and she used to be one of my best. Regular, like clockwork. An egg a day, at least.”

Reilly looked down at the fat brown hen on his examination table. “I’m certain, if she isn’t off her feed, that she’ll soon recover.”

“But that’s just it,” Mrs. MacAdams said, her generous bosom heaving. “That’s just it, sir! She *is* off her feed. Oh, willna you have a look at her, please?”

Reilly blinked sadly at the chicken. At least, he supposed it was a chicken. Hens were, he believed, the female in the chicken genus, roosters the male. Was a rooster a chicken? He wasn’t at all certain. His ignorance of all things agrarian had never become more apparent than in the past few weeks, when his services had been sought for any number of ailments involving sheep, horses, cows, and even, one memorable afternoon, a hedgehog. He had, as yet, seen only one human patient, and that hardly counted, since it had been Lord Glendenning, who suffered from ingrown toenails. Reilly—in spite of the fact that he had taken up residence in the dispensary in order to avoid the earl—had turned into exactly what Iain MacLeod had sworn he was not: a personal physician.

Not, of course, that the people of the village of Lyming were so very healthy. Not at all. They were quite a sickly lot, as a matter of fact. But none of them seemed willing to trust the new physician with their ailments. Very few of them seemed to trust him with their livestock’s illnesses. The only time he was ever consulted at all was when . . .

“Miss Brenna said to feed her warm mash,” Mrs. MacAdams informed him. “But mash is so dear. Can you no’ think of something else that might help?”

. . . a second opinion—make that a *different* opinion—was sought.

“If Miss Donnegal thinks warm mash is in order,” Reilly said, handing the chicken back to the woman, “then warm mash, I am afraid, is probably what’s in order. Miss Donnegal knows chickens far better than I.”

Mrs. MacAdams shook her head as she stuffed her former best layer back into the basket she'd carried her in.

"All right then," she said. "If you say so, doctor. Only I can't help feelin' it's a sorry waste. Mash, for a chicken."

"Shocking business," Reilly agreed with her, as he walked her out of his examination room and into the outer room—where, he saw disconsolately, no patients waited. "Shocking business indeed."

He opened the door for his patient and her mistress and was pleased by the warm breeze that greeted them. Spring was upon them, and there were starting to be leaves on the trees and a twinkle in the eye of every ram on the hillside—or at least Reilly supposed they were rams, not being any more familiar with sheep than he was with chickens. In any case, it was lambing season, and that meant that every available man—who was not out with his nets in the loch—was in the hills looking for ewes that may have gotten, as the common vernacular had it, "into a spot of trouble." Reilly hadn't seen hide nor hair of Brenna Donnegan since the season started. Her small hands, so skilled in slipping into birth canals, were apparently in dire need.

While their men busied themselves seeing to the expansion of their flocks, the women of the village were taking advantage of the seasonable warmth to sell homemade—or homegrown—wares in an open air market not two doors down from Reilly's dispensary. While this was a rather optimistic endeavor—the village of Lyming was so small that almost no one who did not live there ever passed through it, and everyone who lived there, it seemed, had a booth in the market—Reilly had been enjoying the wares the women offered a good deal. There were delicious meat pies to be had from Mrs. MacGregor, leeks and radishes from Mrs. Murdoch, luscious loaves of bread from Mrs. Conall, and heavenly-scented soaps from the estimable Mrs. Murphy.

Even the hapless Flora was manning a table, though hers only offered tankards of ale for pennies a brew. Still, Reilly made it a habit to visit her table a few times a day. If she was kept busy with customers, he thought, she might not have time to moon over the earl, a habit she'd taken up since his last refusal to make an honest woman of her.

As he approached her booth now—after having put a *Back In Five Minutes* sign upon his door, a mostly futile gesture since only a very few inhabitants of Lyming could actually read—he could see that she was at it again. The girl stared moodily up at the castle, balanced in such a seemingly precarious manner on a crag far above their heads. Only when he cleared his throat did Flora stir, and say dejectedly, "Oh, Dr. Stanton. It's you. Hello."

"That's a fine greeting," Reilly said more heartily than he felt, "for your best customer. A pint, please, Flora, and careful of the foam this time."

Flora sighed and went to work with her tap—or rather, Mrs. Murphy's tap, since the ale booth was provided courtesy of The Tortured Hare.

“I’m sorry,” Flora said, in the same flat voice. “Only I just canna stop thinking about him. I suppose that’s what it means to be in love.”

Reilly said with the same false cheer, “Now, Miss Flora. You know he’s not half good enough for you.”

“I know.” Flora sighed again, her thin shoulders beneath the ragged lace shawl she wore, heaving. “Tom Feeney asked me to marry him just last week.”

Genuinely—and happily—surprised, Reilly said, “Well, that’s a very good thing, Flora. Tom’s a fine lad. Why don’t you say yes to him, then?”

Flora shook her head until her pale gold curls swayed. “Wouldna be fair to Tom, me marryin’ him, knowing I love another. Besides, his mother canna stand me.”

Reilly, who knew Mrs. Feeney, could see why the girl might hesitate upon that account. He dropped a coin into her open palm and, taking his tankard, said, “Well, don’t you worry, Flora. There’ll be plenty of other blokes. Pretty girl like you can’t help attracting them, like flies to honey.”

Flora blinked up at him, her blue eyes filled with tears. “Aye, but not the bloke I want.”

This was uttered in so mournful a tone that Reilly was quite at a loss as to how to reply. So rather than saying anything, he chucked the girl under the chin, slipped her another coin, and moved away, ostensibly to see how sales of meat pies were progressing, but more so in an effort to escape her sorrowful presence.

In spite of Flora’s low spirits, Reilly could not help feeling as he strolled, inhaling the salt air and listening to the chatter of the women, so like the cawing of the gulls spiraling above their heads, hoping to catch a spare crust of bread, that he had done right in his decision to come to Skye. True, he had only one patient—unless one counted Mrs. MacAdams’s chicken.

But never in London had he felt as at ease with himself as he did here in Lyming. Perhaps it was the brisk sea air, or the lack of choking chimney smoke. Perhaps it was the good honest food from Mrs. Murphy’s kitchen, or her delicious ale. Perhaps—and this seemed most likely—it was the good, honest folk who inhabited the small fishing village. No pretensions, no over intellectualizing of things. In Lyming, a fisherman was a fisherman, and a fish was a fish, and everyone knew their place and did not—well, with the exception of Flora—aspire to anything greater.

He was beginning to feel that here, at last, he truly could be merely Dr. Stanton, rather than the “marquis physician.” If only he could get one or two patients.

Still, in spite of this small disappointment, overall, Reilly felt—rather than being bored, as one might have expected, considering the long hours he spent waiting for patients—invigorated.

Of course, this might have been more due to the slowly warming weather than any suspicion he

might, at last, have found a place where he not only belonged but was actually needed. The rams weren't the only creatures about who had that telltale springtime twinkle in their eyes. Reilly had noticed a similar shine to the eyes of many of the village's occupants—and in none more so than its lord.

This worthy peer came careening into the village with his usual unnecessary theatrics, scattering chickens, dogs, and children right and left as he charged through the marketplace on his black stallion, the reins of which he pulled short upon noticing Reilly. Then, leaping from the beast's massive back, he waved in Reilly's face a piece of foolscap.

"Well," the earl said. He was clearly quite pleased with himself. "That's it, then. The answer to both our problems."

Reilly regarded the chuckling nobleman without enthusiasm. His feeling of well-being had abruptly fled, and it wasn't just because of the nervously stamping steed that had come to far too short of a stop beside him.

"What problem?" he asked, although he already knew the answer. Christine had had an unfortunate affection for Tennyson, and one of that poet's lines had proved distressingly true in the case of Lord Glendenning . . . that in spring, a young man's fancy turned to thoughts of love. As the sun had melted away the winter snows, Lord Glendenning's passion for Miss Brenna Donnegal had likewise heated up, and he had become more obsessed with the idea of luring her into matrimony than ever, despite Reilly's urging the earl to give the matter a rest.

"Brenna, of course," was the earl's unsurprising reply to Reilly's question. "Stuben's just brought the mail over, and what do you think was in today's post?"

Reilly, who'd been expecting a replacement microscope, asked after it hopefully. Iain MacLeod made a disgusted expression in response.

"Not your bloody microscope," he declared. "A letter for Miss Donnegal, from the little friend who's been covering up for her. It seems the cat is out of the bag—"

Reilly, thunderstruck, snatched the foolscap from the earl's fingers and turned it over.

"Good God," he cried, when he saw the address. "This is a private letter for Miss Donnegal!"

The earl, looking annoyed, snatched it back. Behind him, his mount snorted, made nervous by the sudden motion.

"I know it," he said. "And listen to what it says. . . ."

Reilly tore the missive from the earl's fingers. "I most certainly will not. Are you mad? You can't go about opening other people's private correspondence. Does Miss Donnegal know you read her mail?"

The earl looked confused. “I don’t know. I suppose she must. Everything comes to her open, so she must know someone’s reading it. But she’s never said anything. Well, except for once or twice.”

Reilly could hardly believe his ears.

“This is intolerable,” he cried. “When are you going to leave that woman alone?” Noticing that his raised voice had attracted the attention of a number of the villagers—and made the already fractious horse stamp its feet—he controlled himself and hissed, “I forbid you from pawing through Miss Donnegan’s correspondence. Do you understand me, Glendenning?”

To his utter fury, the earl only grinned at him.

“*You forbid me?*” he said, with a chuckle. “Oh, that’s rich. I’m your employer, remember, Stanton? Not the other way around. Though nobody’d know it, from the way you order me about.”

Reilly winced a bit at this accusation—which was a perfectly true one. He had continued to keep the fact that he was the eighth Marquis of Stillworth a secret, primarily because it had no real bearing on anything to do with his existence thus far on the island. But truth be told, Miss Brenna Donnegan’s antipathy toward blue-blooded members of the medical profession had more to do with his decision to keep mum on the matter than anything else.

Still, even if he had chosen to reveal his secret to Lord Glendenning, earls outranked marquises . . . even ignorant earls who spent all their time plotting ways to trick physicians’ daughters into wedding them.

“Nevertheless,” Reilly said, severely. “You aren’t to tamper with the young lady’s mail. It’s bad form, Glendenning. And not in the least lover like.”

The earl scowled at hearing this.

“But look here,” he said. “That letter there says—”

Reilly held out a single hand. “I do not care to hear it. Put it out of your mind. For I won’t listen.”

“But—”

It was at this point that the two men were interrupted by a small voice.

“Excuse me.”

Reilly looked down and saw the boy he’d first met at Burn Cottage, Hamish MacGregor, standing there, with his hat crumpled between his fingers, and his dog sitting expectantly at his side. Hamish’s gaze, which was quite penetrating, was on the earl.

“What is it, Hamish?” Reilly asked. He’d had numerous occasions for further interactions with

Hamish, as the boy, when he and Lucais were not tending their flock, had taken a strange liking to the dispensary and hung about its doors a good deal. This might, of course, have been Reilly's fault, for while his microscope had not arrived, a large shipment of French candy his sisters had sent to him had, and he'd handed out most of it to the local village children, who passed his offices on their way to and from school. Hamish in particular seemed to have a great affection for the sweets and now clung to the young physician's heels a good deal more than Reilly would have liked.

"It's about them traps," Hamish said, still addressing the earl.

The earl glanced down at the boy, looking annoyed. Even Reilly was forced to groan. Hamish had taken to crusading, since Lucais's accident, against the earl and his wolf traps. Lucais had recovered very nicely from his injury, but the boy still held a grudge against the man he felt responsible for it.

"Not again," the earl muttered. "Listen, Hamish, I told you before: so long as those wolves keep menacin' my deer, I'll keep laying those traps."

Hamish, however, stubbornly refused to drop the subject.

"I'd like to know," he said, to the earl, "just how many wolves you've caught this year in them traps and how many innocent dogs you've hurt instead of wolves."

"I told you," Lord Glendenning said. "None so far . . . but that doesn't mean they aren't out there. Now run along, will you? Dr. Stanton and I are having a private conversation—" At which point, Lord Glendenning, letting go of his charger's reins, reached for the letter Reilly still held. "If you'd just read it, Stanton," the earl said, as Reilly swiftly pulled the foolscap out of reach of his questing fingers, "you'd see that her uncle—"

"Lord Glendenning!" Hamish shouted, having to dart beneath the enormous stallion's hooves in an effort to avoid being trampled as the horse moved about, irritated by the earl's swift movements as he angled to pry Brenna's letter from Reilly's hand. "You havena answered the other part of my question. Just how many dogs have you caught in them traps instead of wolves?"

Glendenning, almost wrestling Reilly now for the foolscap, growled, "None but that mongrel of yours is stupid enough to get himself stuck in a trap meant for wolves—"

It was at that moment that Flora, drawn toward the earl the way the moon draws water, sidled up to him.

"My lord," she said, in a voice that revealed none of the desolateness it had shown when she'd spoken earlier to Reilly, "would you like a pint? I can get you one. 'Twill only take a moment."

Glendenning looked down at her and smiled in a manner that would have wrenched the heartstrings of any girl, let alone a lovelorn barmaid who'd already borne him four children.

"Why, thank you, sweetheart," he said. "I'm parched dry."

Flora, delighted by this opportunity to please the object of her affections, let out a squeal and hurried off to obey her master's wishes. Unfortunately, Lord Glendenning's stallion, not the most even tempered of creatures in the first place, was startled by her sudden darting motion, and chose that moment to rear.

Had the animal's reins been securely held by the earl, what happened next would never have occurred. But because Lord Glendenning had dropped the reins in an effort to seize the letter Reilly held, the horse brought his heavy hooves down some distance from where he'd originally been standing—and one of them struck Hamish MacGregor hard in the head.

Too late, Reilly, who'd been an unwilling witness to the accident, shouted a warning. Hamish never heard it. Down the boy went, limp as one of Flora's wet dishrags.

Glendenning's horse continued to stamp and snort far too near the boy's unconscious form. Reilly shouted for the earl to control his mount, then darted in beneath the creature's massive hooves once a startled Lord Glendenning had secured the reins, and knelt beside the injured boy.

It was not easy to make the necessary examination. Almost everyone who had been in the marketplace at the time had witnessed the accident, and came running toward the victim, shouting various pieces of advice as to how he'd best be treated. Lucais, confused and frightened, took to barking frantically very close to Reilly's ear. And the earl, having finally realized what had happened, was eloquent in his self-deprecation.

“ ’Tis my fault,” Glendenning kept saying, over and over again.

“Nay, my love.” Flora would not allow the light of her life to admit any wrongdoing. “ ’Twas the dog. The dog barked, and it startled poor Tornod—”

“My bairn!” Mrs. MacGregor, Hamish's mother, had unfortunately been at her meat pie booth at the time of the accident and had seen the whole thing. The woman had to be restrained from throwing herself bodily across her son . . . but that did not stop her keening. “My sweet bairn, my biggest boy!”

Reilly's cursory examination, conducted in the face of all these distractions, proved disheartening. In fact, he was able to come up with a diagnosis all too quickly . . . and not one he liked, either.

“Would you *please*,” he shouted at the women—and the earl—who clustered around him, “get back and give me some room to work?”

Lord Glendenning for once made himself useful by spreading his enormous arms and pushing the women—including the boy's mother—back.

“Let the doctor work, now,” the earl said, in his best soothing tone—undoubtedly the same one, Reilly thought bitterly, with which he'd lured Flora into his foul embrace. “Dr. Stanton knows what he's doing. He's from London, after all. The boy will be fine in Dr. Stanton's hands.”

Reilly was not in the least convinced that this was the case, however. And his concern must have shown on his face, since it was only seconds later he heard the first murmur:

“Someone should go for Miss Brenna.”

And then, “Aye, Miss Brenna will know what to do.”

“Run for her, Una. Run for Miss Brenna.”

“I saw her in the sheep meadow this morning, helping Barra with one of his ewes. . . .”

This last resulted in a noticeable lessening of the crowd around the stricken boy as the more fleet-footed of the women set off to find Brenna Donnegan. Reilly could not feel offended by their lack of faith in his abilities. Judging by what he’d seen so far, the lad might very well be beyond his help . . . beyond anyone’s help.

“Someone find me a board,” he commanded the group Lord Glendenning was holding back. “Something we can use as a stretcher to keep him stable while we move him into the dispensary. . . .”

Lord Glendenning was the only one who moved to obey him. He walked toward Flora’s ale booth, flung the keg and tankards from it, and in one swift motion pried a plank from the sawhorses where it had been resting, and presented the plank to Reilly for approval.

“That’s fine,” Reilly said. “Place it there beside him—”

Carefully, Reilly moved the boy onto the board. Though he had felt Hamish’s neck for injury and found none—remembering the equestrian injury that had killed his own father—he wanted to jar the lad as little as possible.

“All right, now,” Reilly commanded—he had to speak with some energy, in order to be heard over Lucais, who continued to bark uncontrollably. “Lift him on my count—”

And so it was that the nineteenth Earl of Glendenning and the eighth Marquis of Stillworth conveyed an unconscious shepherd boy into the village dispensary, with wailing women and a barking dog close upon their heels.

Inside the surgery, where Reilly and Glendenning moved the boy from board to examination table, the cacophony from grieving onlookers proved entirely too much for the physician to bear, and he informed the injured boy’s mother that she had better control herself, or he would see that she was physically removed from the premises.

This seemed to startle the woman to such an extent that for five whole minutes she was silent, and Reilly was able to conduct a more thorough examination of her son.

What he learned from that examination, however, was not promising. Glendenning, who’d sat in the

surgery beside him, passing him reflex hammers and, upon one occasion, a match, glanced at him hopefully. Reilly could only shake his head.

When he addressed Mrs. MacGregor the next time, it was with a good deal more gentleness.

“Madam,” he said, stepping into the dispensary’s small outer room—made all the more crowded by the dozen women who were jammed into it, anxiously awaiting the doctor’s prognosis. “Your son has been gravely injured—”

“But . . .” It was Flora who spoke. “But I saw him. He wasna even bleeding. . . .”

“No,” Reilly said. “That’s true. Not outwardly. But I am as certain as I can be that Hamish is bleeding inside his head—beneath his skull. Which is very bad indeed.”

The women glanced at one another. They had, none of them, ever heard of such a thing as internal bleeding. Their lives, Reilly suspected, were made up of medical emergencies no more complicated than the occasional fish hook through the skin, the intermittent burn, births, and, of course, the sporadic cholera outbreak.

The truth of this assumption was illustrated by Mrs. MacGregor when she asked, “Are you sayin’ he’s hurt bad then?”

Reilly nodded. “Very badly, indeed.”

“Will he . . .” Mrs. MacGregor chewed her lower lip. “Will he die?”

“He will,” Reilly said. He felt quite miserable and wished Pearson, or even Shelley, were standing beside him, instead of that lout of an earl, and could help him explain to this woman the gravity of her son’s situation. “If the bleeding is not relieved.”

Mrs. Murphy, ever the practical businesswoman, immediately grasped the situation, and said in an indignant voice, “Well, relieve the bleedin’ then.”

Reilly grimaced. “It isn’t as easy as it might sound,” he explained to the pale, stunned faces before him. “It’s a very risky and dangerous operation, in which I would have to drill a hole through the boy’s skull—”

Mrs. MacGregor chose that moment, perhaps mercifully, to faint.

During the ensuing chaos this caused, the door to the dispensary was flung open once more, and a voice Reilly thought would never cease to surprise him with its gravelly deepness shouted, “What is this? Ladies, please! Control yourselves!”

It was Mrs. Murphy who filled Brenna Donnegan in on what she’d missed.

“Hamish hit his head,” she announced from where she stooped, fanning Bessie MacGregor’s

unconscious face. “And Dr. Stanton says the only way to save ’im is to drill a hole through his skull in order to relieve the bleeding.”

“Dunna let him, Miss Brenna,” one of the other women cried. “Dunna let him do Hamish that way.”

Reilly felt Brenna’s gaze upon him before he even lifted his own to meet it. It was quite extraordinary, the directness of this woman’s gaze and the effect it had upon him. He could not look into those blue eyes, so richly framed in coal black lashes, and not feel that he had made a colossal mistake in becoming this woman’s enemy.

How such a thing had even come about, he still wasn’t certain. In the weeks that had passed since that very unpleasant argument in Burn Cottage, the two of them had hardly spoken—by Brenna’s choice, however, not his. He still found himself feeling quite concerned for the welfare of this woman who was so very alone and so very stubbornly determined to remain so. He could not even drum up any particular resentment toward her, though he had, he knew, every reason to dislike her, seeing as how her presence here on the island had all but ruined any chance he might have had at establishing a regular practice.

No, toward Miss Donnegal, Reilly maintained mingled feelings of respect tinged with exasperation, since, although she was a woman who seemed very much to know her own mind, she appeared equally unwilling to admit that her mind might possibly be in error.

She was, he saw, when he looked across the crowded dispensary waiting room, still lovely as ever, and thankfully still given to going about in those remarkable trousers. . . .

Only now they did not look so appealing as they had in the past, being quite thoroughly covered in what he could only suppose was sheep placenta.

“May I have a word with you in private, doctor?” Brenna asked, flinging some of her long red curls back behind her shoulders.

“Of course,” Reilly said, and he stepped aside so that she could pass through the narrow doorway into the surgery. As she did so, he saw that her sweater was similarly stained with afterbirth and God only knew what else.

He also saw that beneath those lovely eyes of hers lurked the palest of shadows. Lambing season, Reilly concluded, had not been kind toward Miss Brenna Donnegal.

The earl was hovering over the patient, looking hideously worried. When he saw Brenna, his manly face crumpled, and he said in a voice that showed how close he was to tears, “Oh, Brenna. Look what’s happened. ’Twas Tornod that did it. I wasn’t watching him proper—”

Brenna, though she laid a soothing hand on the earl’s shoulder, did not even glance in Lord Glendenning’s direction. Her gaze was on the boy on the examination table.

“It was an accident, my lord,” she said. “Could you leave us for a moment, please?”

And Iain MacLeod—that great, powerful warrior—did exactly what she said, without so much as another murmur.

Pushing some of Hamish’s hair—a more vibrant copper color than her own—from his forehead, Brenna stood looking down at him, obviously taken aback at the sight of the noisy, adventurous boy she knew so well lying so still and white-faced.

“His reflexes are almost nonexistent,” Reilly said, breaking the news to her quickly, as swiftness, he felt, was the kindest way to deliver bad news. “Breathing irregular and shallow. Worst of all, one of his pupils doesn’t respond to light. Which means—if I remember correctly—that he probably has a blood clot pressing on the brain.”

Brenna seemed incapable of saying anything at all except, “My God,” and that she murmured while pushing more of the boy’s hair back from his face.

“A trephine is the only conceivable way to save his life,” Reilly went on. “And even then . . . well, I don’t know.”

She lifted her gaze from the little boy’s face to his. Her blue eyes were filled with emotion—pain, regret, concern—which flitted across the blue background of her irises like clouds across a summer sky.

“A what?”

“A trephine. A technique the Americans use to treat survivors of Indian scalplings . . . what few survivors there’ve been. A hole is drilled through the skull to bring blood up and out from beneath it. . . .”

“A hole.” Brenna looked back down at the little boy’s face. “Through the skull.”

“Relieves the pressure on the brain.” Reilly sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know what else I can do. The fact is, he’ll certainly die without the surgery—but he might die even if I perform it. Have you any experience with this sort of thing?”

She glanced at him. For once, her cocky self-assurance was gone.

“Drilling holes in people’s skulls? None at all,” she said. “I’ve never even heard of such a thing.” Then her gaze dropped back down to the patient. “Do you know how to do it? This . . . trephine?”

Reilly gave his hair another uncomfortable sweep with his fingers. “Um, I saw one done once. On a cadaver.”

“You saw one,” she repeated.

He nodded.

“On a cadaver,” she said, as if for clarification.

Again, he nodded. It was the literal truth, but somehow, coming from her lips, it sounded ridiculous.

She was looking at him again, this time very steadily.

“If you perform this surgery and fail,” she said evenly, “they’ll blame you. His parents, I mean. If Hamish dies.”

He nodded. “I know,” he said.

“Not just the MacGregors, either,” Brenna informed him. “The entire village will shun you.”

So what else would be new? Well, that wasn’t true, exactly. It wasn’t that the villagers shunned him—quite the opposite, in fact. They had been incredibly welcoming, for the most part, from his drinking mates at The Tortured Hare to their hardworking wives.

They just did not choose to come to him with their medical problems.

And if Hamish died on account of Reilly botching his surgery, they never would.

The cold sensation that gripped his heart at the thought caused Reilly to realize just how attached he’d grown to this island community and its quirky natives.

“If you’re doing this,” Brenna went on, relentlessly, “in order to impress that fiancée of yours—”

“For God’s sake,” Reilly snapped. “Give me a little credit, would you? Do you think I’d perform a dangerous, risky surgery on a child in order to impress a woman? Not hardly. But what else would you suggest I do, Miss Donnegan? He’ll die for certain if I don’t try. And even if I do—well, there’s still a very good chance Hamish won’t pull through.”

She regarded him steadily, her cerulean gaze shrewd as ever.

“He hasn’t any chance at all of pulling through without the surgery,” Brenna said, quietly. “I think it’s worth the risk. Start getting ready for the operation. I’ll go and tell them I’m assisting. That way . . . well, they can blame me, too.”

Reilly felt a sudden rush of gratitude toward her. His emotions, where Brenna Donnegan was concerned, seemed to be changeable as the color of the sea. Just a moment before, he’d felt only antipathy for her, for asking if he was performing the surgery for the sake of Christine. As if he’d spared Christine a single thought in weeks. . . .

As she slipped out of the surgery to deliver her message, Brenna laid a hand upon his arm. He looked down at her, surprised by the gesture.

“Go to it, then,” she said, with the smallest of smiles.

He recognized the words he’d spoken to her when Flora’s baby had proved breech. He knew now how she must have felt when he’d uttered them:

Frightened witless.



It had been, at the time, nothing more than an afternoon's diversion. They hadn't expected, any of them, ever actually to have to perform this surgical technique. Reilly had noticed the flyer advertising the lecture and had suggested they attend because, well, damn it, Indians were awfully exciting, and it was a frontier doctor who'd be giving the demonstration. They might have a good laugh at his expense, particularly if he spoke with an American twang and wore a hat.

He had worn a hat, but to Pearson's and Shelley's disappointment, it had not been a cowboy hat but a perfectly respectable top hat. And his twang had not been amusing enough to keep the two of them from promptly falling asleep in their comfortable chairs in the back row of the auditorium.

But Reilly, for some reason, had chosen to stay awake. Worse—and he would never admit this to Pearson and Shelley later, when the lecture was over and he'd roused them from their naps—he'd actually moved to the front row and watched in fascination as the man showed how blood flow could be drawn across the surface of a scalped skull, enabling skin to grow once more where there had been nothing but bone. The technique, the American doctor had explained, was also helpful for relieving clotting. All it took was a straight awl, a hammer, and a steady hand.

Well, Reilly had had all three there in the dispensary. But there was still no telling whether the surgery had paid off. Hamish was breathing more regularly, that was true. But his left pupil was still sluggish to light stimulus.

The boy might survive. Yes, he might survive.

He might survive and be an idiot.

If you could call that surviving.

Reilly, leaning against the railing of the pier, inhaled the sweet, pungent aroma of his own cigar and then coughed. Wretched habit, smoking. He'd never gotten the hang of it the way Pearson and Shelley had. The box of cigars they'd sent him as a joke—the implication being that he'd need to take up smoking if he wanted to drown out the odor of fish that seemed to cling to everything in the village of Lyming—had remained unopened until tonight.

Now, however, he felt very badly in need of a smoke.

What he really wanted, actually, was a drink. And it wouldn't have been hard to get one, either. Although no lights burned in the windows of The Tortured Hare, he could have strolled right in and poured himself a whisky. The door would open easily under his hand. No one in Lyming bothered locking up, with the exception of Brenna Donnegal and her mysterious locked room, and now Reilly himself, who took the precaution of locking the dispensary, where he kept dangerous drugs and chemicals.

But if he walked into The Tortured Hare, he might trip over Samuel MacGregor, who'd drunk himself into a stupor upon learning that his son had survived the invasive surgery. MacGregor had bought every man in the village a drink, and the outer room of the dispensary had abruptly cleared out—all except for the women. The women stayed, to comfort Bessie MacGregor, who refused to leave her son's side until he woke.

What Bessie did not know, and Reilly hadn't the heart to tell her, was that her son might never wake. The longer he lay there in that deathlike stillness, perfectly senseless of the fact that his mother was beside him, stroking his hand, and his faithful dog sat at the foot of the narrow bed he lay upon, the less, Reilly felt, were his chances of ever waking.

But Reilly hadn't mentioned that to anyone. He hadn't needed to mention it to the only person in the room who'd actually understand—who was also the sole person in the room who had not reeled in jubilation at the news of the boy's having lived through surgery: Brenna understood that just because the boy had survived the surgery was no reason to suppose he'd survive the night.

But she'd put a brave face on it and borne with the family's celebrating—up to a point. She'd been the one who'd explained that Hamish's condition was still very grave . . . words of caution that fell upon deaf ears, at least so far as Mr. MacGregor was concerned. The boy's mother, at least, seemed to realize all was not yet golden.

And it was her anguished face Reilly had found he could no longer look upon, and so he'd left the surgery, in search of fresh air and some privacy.

Fresh air he found. There was virtually nothing else on Skye. He stood on the pier, the same one where he'd knelt six weeks earlier, his head lain across Stuben the ferryman's chest, listening hopelessly for a heartbeat that simply wasn't there.

It was a good deal warmer tonight than it had been then. He could stand with perfect comfort without a cloak.

But the weather, he thought dismally to himself, was about the only thing that had changed since that night.

His feelings on the subject of Lyming, and his place in it, had undergone a significant change since before Hamish's accident. He had not, as he'd hoped, carved out any sort of place for himself on Skye. Oh, he had the dispensary up and in running order. He had helped deliver one baby and prescribed warm mash for a single chicken.

But that was all he'd accomplished.

Unless, of course, one counted that today, he also might have succeeded in causing permanent brain injury to a child who, thankfully, probably would have died anyway.

Oh, he'd certainly found a place for himself here on Skye. No question of that.

It was his own fault, he supposed. He ought never to have left London. In London, he hadn't been called upon to perform any medical procedure more taxing than the removal of a mole. Perhaps Brenna was right, and peers such as himself, who only dabbled in the medical arts, did not deserve medical licenses. Perhaps he ought to have stuck to being the "marquis physician." Christine certainly wouldn't have broken off their engagement then. His drinking had bothered her, temperate creature that she was, but the fact that he'd refused to allow his patients to milord him had bothered her, he was finally forced to admit to himself, far, far more than his whisky a day. . . .

And it was for this reason, he realized, he could never have married her.

He shook himself, startled at the thought. Good Lord, what was this? Maudlin thoughts, like the fog that seemed sometimes to swallow up the island, had crept into his head of late. This was not the first time it had happened. Occasionally, when he was wakened in his cot at the dispensary by the sound of the fishermen's voices as they headed out to sea, their small crafts followed by hundreds of screaming gulls, a feeling of inexplicable contentment overcame him.

Contentment. From the sound of the chatter of a scraggly bunch of fishermen and the squawking of gulls. Ridiculous.

Like this idea he could never have married Christine. He loved Christine. He would have done anything for her.

Oh, really? asked a voice in his head. Such as give up medicine? That was what she wanted you to do, you know. Give up medicine and retire to Stillworth Park and spend the rest of your days listening to the complaints of your tenant farmers. . . .

Yes, he said to himself, his fingers curling into fists along the pier's railing. Yes, he would even have given up medicine, if it had meant having Christine back.

So why, back in the dispensary, when Brenna had asked him if he was performing that trephine to save Hamish's life or impress Christine, had he said . . . well, what he'd said?

More incredibly, he realized now, he'd meant it. God help him, he really had. Somehow, the daily concerns, the problems, the *lives* of the people of this backward village had become intrinsically wrapped up in his own. Just when, precisely, he had gone from wanting to help them in order to show people back in London that "Stillworth's Folly" had paid off, to wanting to help them because he actually cared, he could not say.

But he thought it might have been the moment he saw that horse hoof crash into Hamish's skull.

Now, however, he could only chide himself for his arrogance. How could he ever have thought he was fit for a career in medicine? Lives depended upon his knowledge and skill, and his only thought had been that he'd hoped someday to "make a difference."

Make a difference. Oh, he certainly had managed that. He'd made a great difference in Hamish MacGregor's life. Made a vegetable of him, is what he'd done.

He was going home. Tomorrow he would begin packing. With luck, he might be back in London in time for the Ascot races. . . .

"Thinking of her?"

He spun around, startled. He hadn't heard her soft footsteps on the creaky, mostly rotten boards that made up the pier. The sound of the waves had drowned them out.

"Any change?" Reilly asked her, as she came closer.

"No."

Brenna Donnegal still had on the clothes she'd worn for lambing. Any other woman might have slipped home to have a wash and change, but she had stubbornly remained at Hamish's side all through the surgery, and up until now, the wee hours of the morning. Whatever else she might have been, Brenna Donnegal was not vain. She did not seem to care how she looked . . . or how she smelled, which at the moment was of ether, which she'd been in charge of administering to the boy, and, more faintly, sheep.

Which were not, Reilly reflected, unpleasant smells. Just not odors he'd ever expected a woman to exude.

Then it occurred to him that if he was starting to find the smell of sheep inoffensive, he really did need to get back to London, and *right away*.

She leaned her elbows upon the pier railing and looked out toward Lochalsh—invisible, this time of night, due to the impenetrable darkness. There was no moon, though the stars, he thought, had never seemed so bright, nor so numerous. One could not stand in London and see such an expanse of stellar flotsam and jetsam. It was only here on Skye one could tilt one's head back and feel as if the universe was within hand's reach.

Fresh air there was aplenty on Skye. Privacy, he thought. Well, that was another matter.

But, strangely, he did not resent her joining him upon the pier. In fact, he rather welcomed her presence. At least one person, he knew, understood how he felt.

Or thought she did, anyway.

“I’ll write to her, if you like.”

Reilly looked down at her curiously. He could hardly see her in the darkness, though she stood not a foot away.

“Write to whom?” he asked.

“Your fiancée.” She cupped her chin in her hands. “And tell her about all of this. Your valiant struggle to save the life of a local shepherd boy. That way, it won’t seem as if you’re bragging.” She glanced up at him, her eyes the only parts of her he could see distinctly, since her clothing was so dark. “That *was* what you were standing out here thinking, wasn’t it, while you smoked that filthy thing?”

He looked down at the expensive cigar. “Hardly,” he said. And he dropped the cigar into the water, where its red tip was quickly extinguished by the waves.

“Weren’t you? I beg your pardon, then, for my presumption.”

She said nothing else for a moment. Nor did he. He could think of nothing to say. I suppose, he thought, dejectedly, I ought to tell her I’m going. He wondered if she’d try to argue him out of it, but could think of no reason why she might. She’d be well rid of him, he thought. Her right to occupy the cottage would no longer be in question.

“I—” he started to say, but she began to speak at the same moment.

“Go ahead,” he said.

“No,” she said. “That’s all right. You go first.”

“No,” he said. “Ladies first.”

He heard her inhale in preparation for what she said next, which was, “I have never seen anything like what you did in there for Hamish. Considering you yourself had never performed that operation before—well, I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry.”

Of all the things he had been expecting her to say, this was by far the last. Sorry? For what?

He asked as much.

“You know for what,” she said, keeping her face in careful profile to him. “For what I said. About your fiancée, I mean. And for . . . well, you know perfectly well I haven’t exactly been encouraging the villagers to put their trust in you. Not that I’ve discouraged them from seeing you. I just . . . well, I just haven’t turned them away. I ought to have. You’re the trained physician, not me. I just want you to

know I will now. Send them to you, I mean.”

He couldn't help letting out a disgruntled harumph.

“Now that I've managed to kill someone, you mean?” he quipped. “Thank you for the crumbs from your table, Miss Donnegan. I'm sure the villagers will trust my medical opinion now. They'll come running from all over Skye to be seen by the great ham-fisted Dr. Stanton.”

“You don't know that Hamish won't recover,” she said, gently.

And once again, she laid a hand upon his arm. Her fingers were very warm. He could feel their heat through the wool of his coat.

Reilly looked down at her hand, her fingers pale against the darkness of his sleeve. He remembered her expression throughout the surgery—a look of intense concentration that never once left her face, though she had to have been experiencing some strong emotion, since he had known, ever since discovering the boy in her cottage, that the two of them shared a bickering fondness for one another. It had been there in the tender way she'd looked at him, despite the brusk tone she took with him, and, as far as Reilly could tell, everyone on the island.

But there'd been none of that tenderness in her face during the surgery. She had been an unerring and emotionless assistant, supplying aid when he needed it without flinching even when, during the most critical stage in the operation, the actual boring had taken place. Any other woman—and a good many men—would have turned pale and at the very least lost their supper at the sight of the awl entering the little boy's skull.

But not Brenna Donnegan. She'd been as calm as if Hamish had been a stranger to her . . . as calm as if they'd been discussing the weather, and not draining a bloodclot from a little shepherd boy's brain.

Still, as unfeminine as this behavior might seem, not a moment had passed when Reilly had not been conscious that the person working in such close tandem with him was, in fact, a woman. And now, looking down at the place on his arm where her fingers lay, he could not help but recall that it had been awhile . . . a long while . . . since he'd last felt a woman's touch.

At any other time, he'd have thrilled at the thought of Brenna Donnegan touching him. Now, however, he could only think glumly of the little boy's life that hung so precariously in the balance a few dozen yards away.

And that thought made him lash out in a manner that otherwise he'd never have considered.

“And what,” he asked, bitterly, “will you do with yourself, without all your many patients? Continue your research?”

The moment the words came out of his mouth, he wished them unsaid. And yet, there they were,

hanging between them

He felt her withdraw from him . . . both physically, since she pulled her hand away, but also emotionally, as illustrated by her next coldly spoken words.

“Yes,” she said. “I suppose so.”

Idiot, he rebuked himself. And yet he kept on, in the same bitter tone.

“This mysterious research of yours, the nature of which you don’t care to share?”

Her tone dropped another few degrees.

“Indeed.”

He wanted to kick himself. What was he doing? She had meant to be kind. He needn’t have reacted so rudely. All right, so he may not have saved the boy’s life. But was there a surgeon alive who could have? The wound had been a mortal one. . . .

Tell her, the voice inside his head commanded him. Tell her you’re leaving for London in the morning. . . .

“I would be grateful,” he said, with an effort, “if you would. Send some of your patients my way, I mean.”

Off in the distance a thin band of red had appeared along the horizon. It was easier to make out her features now. She was staring up at him with an inscrutable expression on her face.

“Well,” she said, at length. “That’s more like it.”

A great many things, it later occurred to Reilly, might have been said at such a moment. He might have told her, for instance, how much he’d admired her bravery in the face of all of that blood.

Or he might have said something about how much her kind words had meant to him, how close he’d come to chucking it all in. . . .

Or how much he had appreciated her help with the MacGregors, and later, with Hamish’s surgery.

He might, had he been feeling particularly reckless, have even taken her hand, looked deeply into those indigo eyes, and mentioned how, even covered in sheep placenta and smelling of ether, he still found her to be one of the most intoxicatingly attractive women he had ever met, and that, since meeting her, he’d had a difficult time keeping her out of his thoughts . . . in spite of the fact that she was the stubbornest, most contrary person he’d come across in his life.

What he ended up saying was none of these things. What he ended up saying reflected not a single one of those thoughts.

“Only kindly,” he said, “send me your two-legged patients. I’m not all that talented with the four-legged variety.”

In the faint light of the slowly rising sun, he saw her smile. It was a tired smile—not even a whole smile, really. More like half of one. But it was a smile, and he was glad to see it, and could not help but feel pleased with himself for having refrained from uttering any of those insufferably maudlin things he’d considered saying.

It was at that moment that the door to his dispensary was flung open, and Mrs. MacGregor came stumbling out into the dawn, crying out the doctor’s name.

Reilly, his heart suddenly stuttering, called, “Here I am, Mrs. MacGregor.”

And with Brenna fast on his heels, he hurried from the pier, and toward the concerned-looking woman.

“Oh, Dr. Stanton,” she cried, as he came near. “May I give him some water?”

Reilly stood in the red glow of the rising sun, staring at the boy’s mother perplexedly. “Water?” he echoed. “I don’t see—”

“Well,” the woman said. “It’s only that he asked for some, and I didna want to give him any if you didna think it was—”

“He asked for water?” Reilly’s heart began a stutter of another kind entirely. “He’s conscious?”

“Oh, aye,” Mrs. MacGregor said, looking surprised by the doctor’s excitement. “He’s been up for awhile now. Weak as a kitten, but right put out he is with you, doctor, for shavin’ his head. Says he’s going to have to wear a hat all summer, and he isna a bit happy about that, on account of how warm it can get—”

Reilly swung around to face Brenna. “Did you hear that?”

Her face was wreathed in smiles, contrasting oddly with the tears in her eyes. “Hamish doesn’t like hats,” was all she said, however, and that was in a voice that was choked with emotion.

Reilly didn’t think about what he did next. It just happened. And why not? It seemed perfectly natural, after all. He did exactly as he would have done if it had been one of his sisters standing there, or his mother, or his grandmother, for God’s sake. He flung his arms around Miss Donnegan, and lifting her by the waist, spun her around in a circle, while she threw back her head and laughed.

He spun around, he was certain, no more than three or four times. And as soon as she cried out that if he didn’t put her down, she was going to be sick, he did so.

So why, when they looked up, both laughing weakly, did Lord Glendenning, who’d appeared

around the corner, having come down from the castle to inquire about the patient, wear such a forbidding expression?

It had, after all, been perfectly innocent, a simple expression of the giddy joy the news had brought them both. Glendenning hadn't any right, Reilly felt, to look like that. It suggested things that simply weren't there.

Although, if Reilly were strictly truthful, he had to admit that he'd rather enjoyed the feel of Brenna's bosom against his chest as he'd clasped her to him.

"Good news, Glendenning," Reilly said, unable to keep from grinning up at the earl, still astride his mount—not the black stallion this time; Glendenning had at least had the sense to leave that horse at home. "The boy's going to be all right."

No hint of a smile broke the chiseled features hanging above him. The earl said only, "Good news, indeed."

Brenna had not, apparently, noticed Lord Glendenning's disapproval. She said excitedly, "I'm going in to see Hamish," and did so without a further moment's delay, Mrs. MacGregor following her eagerly.

Reilly, exhausted, relieved, exhilarated—a hundred different things—could not help smiling, in spite of his employer's obvious unhappiness.

"Well," he said, giving the mare the earl rode a hearty whack upon the neck. "That was a close one, eh, Glendenning? Looks like you won't have to shoot the stallion after all."

The earl only frowned down at him. "You mean it worked?" he asked. "That drilling-through-the-head thing?"

"It worked," Reilly said, feeling an internal thrill all along his veins even as he said it.

Glendenning looked surprised. He clearly had not had the faith in his employee that he'd pretended. He said, "Well, that's good."

"Good?" Reilly hadn't felt this happy . . . well, since the day Christine had agreed to marry him, he supposed.

Only this was better. Much, much better. He had actually done something. Something good. Something miraculous. He had saved a life. "Stillworth's Folly," indeed!

"It's more than just good, my man," he said, quite forgetting he was speaking to an earl. "And what's more, Brenna said she's going to start telling the villagers to come to me." Reilly was having a difficult time containing his joy. "Instead of seeing them herself. Brenna said that. Come along inside, and let's see how Hamish is faring for ourselves—"

“Just a moment,” the earl said, as Reilly started toward the dispensary.

Reilly paused questioningly. “My lord?”

“You’re calling her Brenna now,” Lord Glendenning said.

Reilly blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Brenna.” The earl was enunciating with a good deal more care than usual. “You called her Brenna just now.”

Reilly felt he just hadn’t any patience for this sort of thing. Not now, this morning, when he’d just created a miracle.

“Right,” he said. “Just like everyone in this blighted village does.”

“Not everyone,” the earl corrected him, tersely, his attention still fixed upon his saddle. “*I* do. *I* call her Brenna. Everyone else calls her *Miss* Brenna.”

Reilly felt the last bit of his delirious joy drain away. It was replaced, instead, by irritation.

“Well,” he said, trying to keep his tone light, “if Brenna doesn’t object to the manner in which I address her, I don’t see why—”

“Oh, no,” Lord Glendenning said, acidly. “I can see that she doesn’t object. She doesn’t object at all.”

Reilly shook his head. Really, but the man was too much sometimes. What was it that he was suggesting now? That Brenna Donnegan harbored some sort of warm feeling for him? How wrong could the man be? The girl had only just gotten over hating him with a passion. Couldn’t the earl see that?

“I’d have thought,” Reilly couldn’t help declaring, with some indignation, “that you’d be a bit more pleased, my lord. It was your mount, after all, that almost killed the child.”

“I am aware of that,” Glendenning stated, woodenly. “And I will be eternally sorry for it, too.”

“What you ought to be,” Reilly ground out, “is eternally thankful to me for saving that boy’s life. I don’t think I care for the implication, Lord Glendenning, in either your words or your tone, that there is anything but mutual respect between Miss Donnegan and myself. The kind of respect colleagues hold for one another.”

“Colleagues?” Glendenning sneered. “And is that what you’re calling one another? And I suppose that in the past, whenever you’ve effected a cure such as this, you’ve tossed your male *colleagues* about in the air and spun them around?”

Reilly set his jaw. “If all you have to say to me, sir, are insults, then I think I will bid you good day.”

What he would have liked to have done, of course, was drive his fist into the intolerable man’s face. But since doing this would necessarily drive a wedge between him and his employer, he restrained himself. He certainly did not wish to be dismissed now, when things were beginning to go so nicely.

Instead, he turned to head back into the dispensary. Glendenning stopped him—not with a fist, but with a word.

“Wait,” the earl said. Something in Glendenning’s tone told Reilly, without his having to glance in the earl’s direction, that he was sorry for his outburst. And indeed, the next words out of his mouth were an apology.

“It’s just that I’ve been on pins and needles all night,” the earl said, morosely, as he walked along beside Reilly, leading his mount by its reins. “Wondering if that boy was going to make it. And then, to come down here, and find *her* in your arms . . . well, it was just more than I could bear.” The earl lifted a heavy hand and placed it upon Reilly’s shoulder. “I ought to have known, of course, that you’d never do such a thing. Try to steal her out from under me, I mean.”

Reilly said nothing. What could he say? That when he’d held her in his arms for those brief few seconds, he’d felt, for the first time in months, as if he were actually alive? That the sensation of her heart beating—however briefly—against his own had awakened in him feelings he’d long thought dead? That the sound of her laughter, as he’d spun her around, had sent the blood in his veins pulsing with renewed purpose, with unparalleled excitement?

He couldn’t say those things. He couldn’t say any of those things. He could only keep his mouth closed, and wonder that they’d transpired in the first place. What was happening to him, anyway?

“This calls for a celebration, I think,” the earl was saying, as he tied up his horse outside the dispensary door. “You’ll come to dinner. No’ tonight. Sunday. Sunday night. Sunday night, you shall have a proper celebratory dinner. No meat pies at Mrs. Murphy’s. What say you?”

Reilly shook himself. He’d only half heard the earl. His attention had wandered. Oddly, it had occurred to him that the coppery glow in the east was not so very different from the deep auburn of Brenna Donnegan’s hair.

“Stanton?” The earl peered at him. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Reilly said, quickly. “I’m fine.”

“Good. Dinner then? Sunday night?”

“Yes,” Reilly said. “Yes, of course. I’ll be there.”

So great was his confusion over what had occurred over the past few minutes that Reilly did not even pause to wonder, as he might otherwise have, precisely what lay behind the earl’s sudden magnanimousness. Instead, he only went into the dispensary with a grin, quite well pleased with the world . . . and, for the first time in a long time, his place in it.



Iain Olaghair MacLeod, nineteenth Earl of Glen denning, requests the pleasure of Miss Brenna Donnegal's company at an evening party, Sunday, April 2, 1847.

An answer will oblige.

Brenna stared at the invitation. An answer would certainly oblige, but what sort of answer was she to give? For it was already the evening of Sunday, April 2, and this mysterious card had only just been shoved, with an urgent thump to accompany it, beneath her door.

When she'd flung the portal open to see who could have left it, she'd seen Rob's unmistakable form, running fleetly toward the burn. She'd called after him, but he'd pretended not to hear—undoubtedly upon the instructions of his master, who would not have wanted to hear the answer she was immediately prepared to give.

Closing the door again, she scowled down at the card. An evening party, indeed! And at Castle Glendenning, no less. Why, she had never heard of an evening party being given there before.

And she couldn't help thinking it was bad luck for the earl's guests—if there were any besides herself, which she rather doubted—that he'd chosen to give this party just as the waters would be rising in the dungeons, forcing the rats into the upper stories of the structure. An odd sort of evening party *that* was going to be, with everyone shaking rats off their feet!

She crumpled the card and threw it on the fire. Lord Glendenning, she mused, simply would not give up. It was a pity she did not find him nearly as appealing as he apparently thought her, for it would be nice to be pursued so aggressively by a swain whose affections she might actually be able to return.

She had gone back to her work—none too enthusiastically, since she was not making anything like the kind of progress she'd have wished—when she was disturbed by yet another knock upon her door.

Sundays had never been much of a day of rest for the more medically-minded members of the Donnegal household. This was because on Sundays, the men of the village of Lyming did not go to work in the fields or their fishing boats. They were, for the first time in a week, home all day, a fact which often led to domestic tension and by evening, the occasional bout of spousal abuse. Brenna

recalled that her father's most interesting cases—the gouged-out eyes and splintered noses—tended to fall upon Sundays, generally the result of strong drink after (and sometimes during) church. . . .

She was careful to close the door to her father's study behind her, but she did not lock it. Her new found resolve to direct all medical emergencies to Dr. Stanton would, she hoped, allow her to return to her desk in a matter of minutes.

But when she opened the door to her cottage, she found not a white-faced child, panting for Miss Brenna to come quickly, Mam had broke Pa's face again, but Dr. Reilly Stanton himself, looking rather dapper in black evening wear.

His expression, when his gaze fell upon her brown homespun, was something to behold.

"Oh," he said, looking a good deal taken aback. "You aren't quite ready yet, then? Well, I can wait."

And he strolled through the doorway, hat in hand, and sank down at the dining table as if it were the most natural thing to do in the world.

Brenna, still standing with her hand upon the door latch, turned to look at him in astonishment. She had not, it was true, seen Reilly Stanton since the day before, when she'd been to visit Hamish who was still recuperating under the doctor's supervision in the dispensary, but that was certainly not such a vast expanse of time that she should have completely forgotten a planned engagement. . . .

Particularly one that seemed to involve, as she could see off in the gloaming just beyond the burn, a horse and carriage.

"I'm sorry," Brenna said, when she'd gathered her wits enough to speak. "But did we have plans of some kind this evening?"

Reilly, who'd been stroking Sorcha behind the ear, looked up in surprise.

"I should say so. Lord Glendenning's having us over for an evening party."

"An evening party?" She shook her head bemusedly. "He invited *you*, too?"

Reilly responded to this with raised eyebrows. "Well, yes. I admit that three is a crowd, but I rather thought you'd be pleased. I don't suppose if I'm there, he'll be able to renew his, er, more amorous pursuits. . . ."

"No," Brenna said, closing the door distractedly. "I suppose not. Only I can't help thinking . . . well, it's just so unlike him, I guess I don't know what to think."

"What's to think about?" Reilly stretched out his legs so that he could rest his heels on the seat of the chair across the table from his. "It's a free meal and rumored to be a fine one. He's let go of that

horrid cook of his for the evening and had Mrs. Murphy come up to the castle especially for us. I understand her much acclaimed stewed rabbit is on the menu, not to mention baked oysters, capons, a turbot with lobster sauce—”

Brenna, her eyebrows still very much raised, interrupted, “You seem to know quite a bit about it.”

Reilly shrugged. “Well, living as close to The Tortured Hare as I do, one can’t help hearing things. And I, for one, am prepared to enjoy a night out. Mrs. MacGregor’s sitting with Hamish, who is, as I’m certain you observed yesterday during your visit to him, mending nicely. I think I can afford to leave him to the ministrations of his mother for a few hours. She’s a sensible sort, when she’s not in fear of her son’s mortal peril, and since he’s recovering so quickly—” Reilly grinned. “—a night out for the doctor appears to be possible.”

Eiric leaped up onto the table and prowled toward the visitor curiously. Reilly Stanton lifted the hand he wasn’t using to stroke Sorchu and scratched the cat beneath the chin.

“Well,” he said. “Hadn’t you better get ready then? Not that I don’t find your current ensemble charming but, well . . .” He wrinkled his nose expressively. “What about that blue thing you had on that day I first met Hamish?”

Brenna let out a frustrated sigh. “Well, *really*,” she began huffily. “I mean, it just seems so strange, and I only just got an invitation a little while ago, and I wasn’t planning on going at all—”

“Why?” He sounded genuinely surprised.

“Why?” Brenna threw her hands into the air. “I do rather try to avoid Lord Glendenning at all costs, Dr. Stanton. He did, after all, try to get you to declare me mentally unfit to live alone. The Lord only knows what he’s planning on doing tonight. . . .”

“I suppose he’s planning to thank us for saving his sorry hide. If that boy had died on account of Glendenning’s stupid handling of that horse, he’d be fairly unpopular round about town, and he knows it.” Eiric’s purr, as Reilly continued to scratch her, grew loud enough to be heard halfway across the room, where Brenna stood. “That’s all he’s up to, I imagine. Now hurry and get dressed. I had to leave the phaeton his lordship leant me on the wrong side of the burn because that blasted bridge isn’t wide enough to admit it.”

Brenna chewed her lower lip. Really, but this was so like Lord Glendenning! He probably hadn’t sent her the invitation sooner because he’d known she’d cry off coming. This way—by loaning his carriage to Dr. Stanton, and sending him here to pick her up—he’d obviously hoped to coerce her into coming.

On the other hand, Reilly Stanton was right about one thing: they had—well, technically, Reilly had, but Brenna had helped—saved him from becoming known as a child killer. Even if it was a horse that had almost killed the boy, it had been Lord Glendenning’s horse, and a horse that really hadn’t any business being in a village square, nervous as it was.

Wasn't it only natural that his lordship would wish to thank them?

"Well," Brenna said, reluctantly.

"Oh, bosh," Reilly said. He swung his feet down and made motions as if he were going to stand up—motions that alarmed Sorch and Eiric, who seemed to be growing fond of his massaging fingers. "If you're going to be this way about it, I'll just go ahead and give Glendenning your apologies. But you're going to miss out on a damned fine meal—"

Brenna, who hadn't tasted Mrs. Murphy's famed stewed rabbit in quite some time, said quickly, "I'll come. Only wait five minutes, will you?"

Reilly, looking pleased with himself, sank back down into his chair, and allowed both cat and dog to nudge their heads back beneath his fingers.

Brenna went into her bedroom and, feeling oddly giddy, threw open the doors to her wardrobe. It had been some time since she'd last had occasion to look her best, and it was strangely thrilling to her that Reilly Stanton should at last see her looking as she had in that dream she'd had so long ago. . . .

Not, she told herself firmly as she pulled from the closet a gown she hoped wasn't too badly creased, that she particularly cared how Reilly Stanton thought she looked. Only . . .

Well, only the last time he had seen her, she had not been looking anything close to her best. Far from it, in fact. She had spent the hours before going to visit Hamish in the dispensary with her arms in the uteruses of various sheep. Lambing waited for no man, and it certainly didn't wait for little boys who were recovering from trephines. She had gone, the very morning Hamish had pulled through his surgery, directly from the dispensary back to the fields, where she'd been almost nonstop ever since. This evening's welcome reprieve had been the first in days. She'd taken advantage of the occasion by enjoying a long hot bath, and had used up almost an entire bar of Mrs. Murphy's soap, trying to wash away the strong odor of sheep, which seemed to have become embedded in her skin and hair.

To think Reilly Stanton had caught her up in that ecstatic embrace and swung her around—as if, she couldn't help remembering, she were no heavier than a thistle, when she knew perfectly well the opposite was true—while she'd smelled like a sheep! She shuddered every time she thought of it.

Well, not tonight. Tonight she would show him that she could not only look like a lady but smell like one too. And so, peeling off the brown gown about which he'd spoken so disparagingly, she went to work.

It was a good deal more than five minutes later that she emerged from her bedroom—closer to twenty, actually. But when she did, and she saw the way Reilly Stanton scrambled quickly to his feet, she could tell that he felt the wait had been worth it.

“My goodness,” he said, the glow in his laughing dark eyes one of appreciation, and if she wasn’t mistaken, admiration. “But you do clean up nicely, Miss Donnegan, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

Brenna felt herself flush with pleasure. Well, why shouldn’t she? She knew she looked quite nice in her gown of ciel blue silk, with its pleated tulle fichu. The blue brought out the color of her eyes, and the fichu of snow white brought out the creamy tone of her bare shoulders. Even her hair, done up in long curls, gleamed becomingly.

She had not spared the perfume, either. No, there was nothing of the barnyard about her now.

And Reilly Stanton, she saw, in the way he offered her the use of his arm, knew it.

“Shall we away, madam?” he asked, with a gallantry that wasn’t quite as mocking as perhaps he’d intended it to be.

“We may,” she started to say, with a graceful incline of her head. . . .

And then she remembered the door to her father’s study. She hadn’t locked it.

She jumped, threw Reilly Stanton a look she hoped he couldn’t read, then darted back toward the study door and threw it open.

Everything lay exactly as she’d left it. The microscope was still in its place, the charts upon the walls and desk undisturbed. With a sigh of relief, she blew out the lamp she’d left burning there, then stepped once more back into the main room and carefully locked the door behind her.

“Ah,” Reilly Stanton said, from where she’d left him by the front door. “The laboratory. Yes, mustn’t forget to lock up the laboratory, Dr. Frankenstein. Wouldn’t want to let the monster out now, would we?”

She threw him a sour look as she plucked up a black lace shawl—too light for so early in the spring, but she refused to allow a heavier wrap to spoil the pleats in the fichu—and threw it round her shoulders.

“Be quiet,” was all she could think of to say by way of witty retort, as she stalked past him into the evening air.

For once, he obliged her. In fact, their ride to Castle Glendenning was mostly a silent one . . . not out of any perversity on either of their parts, but because Reilly had a difficult time navigating the horse along the road that led to the structure, which had become, thanks to the melting snow, a river of mud. Brenna, for her part, spent the journey silently berating herself for having hoped that merely by putting on a pretty dress she could make Reilly Stanton forget the very fact that had kept the two of them, for so long, from becoming friends. . . .

But what else could she do? If what lay behind that study door had been her own secret, she’d have

shared it, gladly—at least, she liked to think she would. Yes, she was almost certain she would, when she considered all that Reilly Stanton had done for Hamish.

But it wasn't her secret. And so she had to remain silent on the matter, or risk betraying the confidence of someone she held very dear. . . .

Eventually, they reached the castle, and even Brenna, who did not hold the earl in much esteem, had to admit herself impressed by the effort he'd gone to that evening in order to make the place appear welcoming. Small torches had been set into the ground all along the steep drive up to the portcullis and flamed merrily as Reilly guided the phaeton between them.

And once inside the portcullis, they were greeted not by Raonull, Lord Glendenning's glum-faced and incompetent man, but by his lordship himself, looking so pleased to see them that Brenna could not help wondering, uncharitably, if he had started tipping champagne without them.

"Dr. Stanton," Lord Glendenning cried. He had, Brenna could see in the torchlight, donned his finest evening wear, opting for both a body plaid, folded across his shoulder and held in place by a heavy—and clearly ancient—pin, as well as a feile-beag, or little kilt, about his waist. The silver buckles upon his highly polished shoes gleamed, and for once, Brenna saw, his glossy dark hair was pulled back.

"And Miss Donnegal," he said with apparent relish. "How lovely you look this evening. I am so glad you decided to join us in our little celebration."

Brenna eyed the earl in the uneasy manner one might eye a snake resting peacefully in one's path.

"Lord Glendenning," she said evenly. "Thank you for the invitation. I—"

But her voice dried up in her throat when Lord Glendenning, who'd offered her his arm, led her with Reilly Stanton following behind, not toward the great hall, where she knew he normally took his meals, but instead toward the formal drawing room where Brenna could not remember a human being having set foot in . . . well, her lifetime, anyway.

"But whatever have you here?" Brenna asked wonderingly, as she stepped through the door the earl held open for her.

She found out a second later.

She ought to have known, of course. She ought to have known it was all a trick.

For there, sitting before the fire in a pair of very uncomfortable-looking Louis XV chairs, sat the minister and his wife.



“*W*e’d heard rumors, of course, that you were back on the island, Miss Donnegal,” the Reverend Marshall said, as he helped himself to a baked oyster.

“But since we hadn’t seen you in church . . .” Mrs. Marshall delicately touched her lips with her napkin.

“. . . we just assumed the rumors were false.” The Reverend, and his wife, Reilly had observed, shared a penchant for finishing one another’s sentences.

Reilly looked from the clergyman to his wife and back again. The tension at the table was so thick one could have cut it with the proverbial knife—or in this case, Iain MacLeod’s ancestral broadsword.

Not that Reilly blamed Brenna for being angry. In fact, he rather admired the fact that she’d managed to keep her temper as long as she had. The Reverend Andrew Marshall and his wife were, he’d found, a rather trying couple. He had met them quite a few times, as Mrs. Marshall had made a distinct effort to make him feel welcome, primarily in the form of presenting him with introductions to her many buck-toothed daughters, none of whom, he’d been relieved to note, were in attendance this evening. They were, of course, not yet “out,” the eldest being not quite sixteen. . . .

But that did not mean that their mother had any qualms about parading them in front of the new village doctor whenever they happened to come home from school, which was only on Sundays, when they took the ferry from their school in Lochalsh in order to attend their father’s service.

Reilly had made an effort to frequent a service or two himself—not out of any compulsion to commune with the Lord, which he felt was better done in the cathedral of nature than any structure built by man, but in order to get to know the congregation, and hopefully, win their trust. He had never, during any of Reverend Marshall’s sermons, noticed Brenna Donnegal in any of the pews, and now he knew why: she had been quite assiduously avoiding the Marshalls, for reasons that became apparent as the evening progressed.

“And you’re saying,” Reverend Marshall continued, now shoveling glazed carrots onto his plate, “that your parents both know and approve of your staying in the cottage alone?”

Brenna hadn’t lost her temper, but that didn’t mean she was very happy about the situation. The

looks she'd been darting at the earl all evening were cold enough to have frozen Mrs. Murphy's magnificent ale. Lord Glendenning appeared completely unaffected by them, however, playing the part of the host to perfection—except for the occasional sudden fits he seemed subject to, when he stamped very firmly on the ground, then looked up guiltily to see if anyone had noticed. After one such incident, Reilly moved to where the earl had been standing and looked down, but had been unable to detect anything suspicious, except a small hole in the mortar between the stones the wall was made up of, out of which, he supposed, a whiskered nose might have appeared.

“Yes,” Brenna replied. “My parents are both aware that I am staying alone in the cottage in their absence. That was the understanding from the beginning, you see.”

The Reverend cleared his throat. He did this approximately every five minutes, and Reilly found the habit noxious, to say the least, and wondered if he ought to prescribe a lozenge.

“That was not what your dear mother told me, Miss Donnegal,” the minister said. “Before she and your father departed our humble shores for their great adventure in the Far East, Mrs. Donnegal told me that you were to go to your uncle in Kilcairn, and with him, to London . . .”

“. . . to stay for the season,” Mrs. Marshall finished for him.

Brenna had hardly touched her rabbit stew, which was a shame because it was really very good.

“There was,” she said, moving the pieces of meat around on her plate, “a change of plans.”

“I should say, a significant one.” Mr. Marshall had another habit which Reilly found even more upsetting than the throat clearing, and that was a tendency to say “Brrr” when he was disturbed about something. “Brrr. Quite a significant change of plans, that.”

“I cannot think,” Mrs. Marshall said, “that your mother would approve, Miss Donnegal, of your staying alone in that out-of-the-way cottage. Especially not now—”

“—with the floods coming,” Reverend Marshall finished for her.

“Well, surely you cannot think I would be there without my parents' express approval,” Brenna said, her eyes opened very wide, giving her every appearance of great innocence. In this she was aided by the color of her dress, which was of a tone exactly matching the blue of her irises, emphasizing their size and this deceptive innocence. Reilly had been quite extraordinarily shocked when she'd emerged from her room looking so very unlike her usual self. Not that she was any less beautiful in sweater and trousers than she was in evening dress. It was simply that there were certain attributes that this particular dress emphasized that the sweater did not. If only she weren't hiding those attributes under that ridiculous fichu. He wasn't able to catch glimpses of them, except for every now and then, when she turned a certain way.

“Frankly, I do not know what to think,” Reverend Marshall said. “I would like, of course, always to think that my parishioners were speaking truthfully to me, but in your case, Miss Donnegal—”

“—your reputation precedes you,” Mrs. Marshall said, with another dab at her mouth with her napkin. “You always were rather infamous for your pranks.”

This last Reilly heard with interest. It was rather uncomfortable, of course, sitting there watching this couple vilify the girl. He had a sense that Glendenning was going to live to regret his little scheme.

But it was also undeniably entertaining.

“Pranks?” he echoed happily. “And what pranks would those be, pray?”

Brenna shot him a dark look from across the table. She had been seated, much to her evident chagrin, at Lord Glendenning’s left, while Mrs. Marshall was at his right. The Reverend sat beside Brenna, while Reilly was honored to have the minister’s wife to his left. The earl, at the table’s head, was the only one in a position to look at the faces of all of the parties present at once.

And so he did not miss the malevolent look Brenna shot Reilly, and seemed, to all appearances, pleased by it.

“Oh, yes, Mrs. Marshall,” the earl said. “Let’s hear about some of the pranks.”

Mrs. Marshall was only too happy to oblige. A minister’s wife had, at all costs, to be as obliging as possible, and Mrs. Marshall felt her role keenly.

“Well, let me see,” she began. “She used to torture her younger brothers rather mercilessly, if I recall. There was that time she dared them to eat every single pie in her mother’s larder—”

“Excuse me,” Brenna chimed indignantly, “but that was a scientific experiment.”

“Very scientific,” Mrs. Marshall agreed primly. “She wanted to determine the rate of digestion of specific berries, and hoped to do so by—”

“—examining the children’s vomit.” The Reverend brrred regretfully at this. “Quite inappropriate behavior. I told her father so, but he failed to see the unseemliness of the thing. Seemed to think—”

“—if the boys were stupid enough to eat until they were sick, they deserved it. But that was nothing,” Mrs. Marshall declared. “What about the time she cut off all her hair and stowed away on Stuben’s ferry?” Mrs. Marshall shook her head. “She had some intention of hiring herself as a lad-of-all-work. Probably would have, too, if—”

“—her father hadn’t tracked her down and put a stop to it.”

Brenna’s defense to this was a very stiff, “I needed the money.”

“Brrr,” the minister said. “Because you wanted to buy—”

“—your own microscope,” Mrs. Marshall finished for her husband. “Quite an unsuitable instrument for a young girl. Why, you could have ruined your pretty eyes! I can tell you that none of my girls have ever expressed a desire for anything so inappropriate. They are content to save their eyes for their needlework.”

Reilly found himself, quite against all reason, thoroughly charmed by these stories. It wasn't so much that he was surprised to learn that Brenna Donnegan had been rather less than an angel growing up—that might easily be guessed just by looking at the expression on her face, which tended to be altogether too knowing for so young a woman.

No, it was the nature of these so-called pranks that delighted Reilly. For it was clear they were the work of a highly inquisitive, highly analytical mind. Each one had been thoughtfully reasoned beforehand, all extraneous information expelled, hurtling the experimenter toward a single, inevitable outcome. . . .

Reilly liked that. Reilly liked that quite a bit.

Then the earl leaned forward and said, “But you're overlooking her greatest prank of all time.”

The minister and his wife exchanged glances. Even Reilly found himself leaning forward in eager anticipation.

“Which was, my lord?” Reverend Marshall asked.

“Not was,” the earl said. “Is, my good man. *Is!* Why, she's pulling this prank on us all, even as we sit here.”

Brenna lifted her napkin from her lap and laid it beside her plate. “My lord,” she said, in a warning voice.

But it was too late. Lord Glendenning was already extracting a piece of foolscap from the sealskin purse—or sporran, the earl called it—that he wore around his waist. . . .

Foolscap that looked oddly familiar to Reilly.

And then he remembered. Good Lord. That crumpled piece of foolscap had been the start of it all, the reason poor Hamish MacGregor had a puncture in his skull. The letter! The letter to Brenna that Glendenning had pilfered from Stuben's mailbag!

“See here, Glendenning,” Reilly said, rising from his chair.

But it was too late. Lord Glendenning was already reading aloud.

My dearest Brenna. I fear the worst has hap pened. My father met your uncle at the opera last

night! Of course Papa asked him how he was feeling. When your uncle confessed that he'd never felt better, Papa expressed surprise, seeing as how only three months ago, you'd used your uncle's ill health as the excuse for your sudden departure from our house in Bath. To which of course your uncle replied, 'If you are Reginald Bartlett, then my niece Brenna is still at your house in Bath. I received a note from her just yesterday mentioning her running into the Prince of Wales in the Pump room,' to which Papa replied of course that he hadn't seen you in weeks and weeks—

It was at this point that Brenna Donnegal rose from her chair and said in a voice that was at once queenly and trembling with rage, "If it was your intention, Lord Glendenning, to humiliate and mortify me in front of these people, then allow me to assure you that you have succeeded."

Lord Glendenning looked up, and against all reason, appeared surprised by her wrath.

"Wait a moment," he said. "I only meant to—"

"I cannot imagine what you meant by this," Brenna said, with a good deal of dignity. "But I am sure what I am about to say will not be misconstrued. Good-bye, and don't you dare speak to me, ever again." Then, turning toward Mrs. Marshall, "And though I don't mean to alarm you, madam, I think you should know there is a rat sitting atop the sideboard just behind you."

With that—to the accompaniment of Mrs. Marshall's piercing shrieks, since she'd turned and spied the aforementioned vermin—Brenna Donnegal glided from the room.

Reilly, being the one closest to the hysterical woman, could not in good conscience do as he would have liked, which was rush out of the room after Brenna. Instead, he was forced to turn his attention to the minister's wife, who had sunk into a dead faint before the last echo of her screams had faded from the room.

It was some time before Reilly managed to resuscitate the good lady. Not being given to swooning as a rule, Mrs. Marshall carried no hartshorn or vinaigrette with her and had to be revived courtesy of a burnt feather plucked from her own headdress. It was decided, once the good lady was able to stand, that a hasty departure from the castle was in order, in spite of the fact that the meringue had not yet been served. The host had disappeared in search of the injured party, who had similarly vanished, and there did not seem to be much point in staying.

Reilly showed the Reverend and his wife to their carriage, and wished them a good night. They did not appear to appreciate this very much, as neither the Reverend nor Mrs. Marshall liked the sage medical advice he offered when the latter complained most fretfully of palpitations of the heart whenever she closed her eyes and the picture of that fierce whiskered face appeared behind her eyelids—that she refrain from closing her eyes.

Reilly, watching their departing carriage grow smaller and smaller as it drove away, could not help but feel yet another wave of admiration for Miss Donnegal. Clearly the memory of the letter Lord Glendenning had read aloud would be supplanted in the minds of the Reverend and his wife by the rat

Brenna had so casually pointed out to them.

Thinking of the letter, Reilly returned to the dining room and found it lying where the earl had dropped it when he'd run off after Brenna. Since his search for Lord Glendenning and the lady in question had proved fruitless, Reilly settled into the earl's abandoned chair and—keeping his feet well off the floor, in case any of the unfortunate rat's cousins happened by, searching for a crumb or two—read the rest of this clearly shocking piece of correspondence. He did not feel he was being particularly ignoble in this pursuit, since the bulk of the missive had already been read to him.

—to which Papa replied of course that he hadn't seen you in weeks and weeks, Miss Mary wrote in her schoolgirlish script. Your uncle was furious, as he said he'd entrusted you to my father's keeping, and went on quite rudely, Papa said, about his complete and total dereliction of his parental responsibilities, saying that if anything had happened to you that he would hold my father legally liable. . . .

Fortunately—Reilly was surprised to see this *fortunately*, since the letter's tone was beginning to fill him with a feeling of foreboding.

Fortunately my sister Sarah overheard, and immediately informed your uncle that you and I had had a bit of a falling out—la!—and that you hadn't liked to worry him with it, but that actually you really were still in Bath, only staying with Elizabeth Sexton, whom you feared your uncle wouldn't like, on account of her father being quite common (he is an attorney). I do believe she managed to smooth the whole thing over, but you simply must write your uncle straight away and confirm Sarah's story. I've spoken with Elizabeth, and she's prepared to go along with it all—

There was more—a good deal more, in fact—but of such nauseating twaddle about hats and some young officers that Reilly could bear to read it no longer. He folded the letter and put it into his waistcoat pocket. He would, he decided, deliver it into the hands of its addressee at his earliest opportunity. In the meantime, he sipped the earl's Madeira and wondered what the man could have meant by his little performance that evening.

It wasn't long before he was joined by that selfsame individual and was able to put the question to the earl himself.

“Oh, dunna remind me of it,” Lord Glendenning said, slumping dejectedly into the chair Brenna had abandoned. The servants had come while Reilly read, and cleared the plates away. All that remained upon the table was the Madeira and some rather conspicuous rat droppings. The earl, Reilly realized, was under siege by vermin.

“I thought . . . I dunna know what I thought,” the earl admitted glumly. “I only knew that my first

plan—getting you to take over the cottage and kick her out of it—didna work. And then my second plan, getting you to declare her insane . . . well, that didna work either. So I thought perhaps if the minister had a word with her—”

“She might fall into your arms, sighing her gratitude for setting her on the path of righteousness at last?” Reilly gazed at the earl in tolerant amusement. “You really are a great ass, you know.”

“I know it,” Glendenning grudgingly acquiesced. “But you can see how it seemed quite a good plan, at first.”

“I can’t. It was an insipid plan from start to finish, and I am delighted I was given the opportunity to watch it blow up in your silly face.”

“Here now,” the earl said, looking wounded. “No need to get personal.”

“My apologies,” Reilly said, getting up. “Where is she?”

“I dunna know.” Glendenning slumped forward against the tabletop until he’d dropped his face onto his folded arms. “She must be here somewhere. Raonull says he didna see her leave.”

“Very well.” Reilly noticed a pointed face poking curiously out from behind the sideboard. The rat that Mrs. Marshall’s shrieks had frightened away was apparently back for another try. “I shall leave you here with your people, then,” Reilly said, gravely.

Glendenning did not ask what he meant. He did not even bother raising his head. Reilly left him like that, thinking the fellow quite deserved everything he’d got coming to him—even a rat up his pant leg, if it came to that. Only in the earl’s case, of course, it would be a rat up his kilt, Lord Glendenning not being partial to pants.

It did not seem likely that Brenna had sought refuge in her favorite place atop the battlements. For one thing, the night air, Reilly had noted while bidding the Marshalls adieu, had grown chilly. She had only the black lace shawl and that ridiculous fichu for warmth. Besides, she wasn’t stupid: it would be the first place Glendenning would have looked for her.

Wondering what could have become of the girl—and just how she intended to square things with the Marshalls who could, he thought, cause her quite a bit of trouble since they surely knew the identity of this uncle of hers—Reilly wandered the castle hallways, poking in and out of rooms, calling her name.

How Glendenning could stand living in this damp mausoleum, Reilly could not imagine. Not only perpetually cold and stinking of moss, but filled with rats as well! Although the dining room, which Reilly had not visited before, the earl having preferred them to take their meals in the great hall, had been quite civilized. That drawing room where they’d first been shown hadn’t been dreadful, either. In fact—this occurred to him as Reilly entered what appeared to be a decaying ballroom—there were quite a few chambers in Castle Glendenning that, given a bit of attention, might well regain some of

their former glory.

The ballroom, for instance, had a remarkably serviceable floor. This he noted after seizing a candelabra from a small table and holding it high to inspect his discovery. The parquet was a bit warped, but it was parquet, just the same. Glendenning was a bigger fool than he thought, if he let this kind of floor go to waste. And then, just as he was about to leave the room and continue his search, he saw out of the corner of his eye a dark and familiar shape. Closer inspection proved that it was, indeed, what he'd thought it. A pianoforte.

Reilly, who hadn't been near an instrument since he'd left London, was surprised to find upon spying this one that he had rather missed playing. Accordingly, he tested the keys and discovered them to be not too terribly out of tune. Before he knew it, he had placed the candelabra atop the instrument, sat down upon the rather moth-eaten bench, cracked his knuckles, and plunked out a tune.

Not bad. A fine old instrument, in fact, with a tone both clear and strong. It hadn't been cleaned in quite a while, but nothing a thorough dusting couldn't solve. Reilly tried a more complicated melody. Ah, yes, the middle C had a tendency to stick, but other than that . . .

The acoustics in the room were quite astounding. He launched into a sonata, losing himself for a moment or two, in the music. . . .

"Very nice."

He broke off playing, startled, and found Brenna Donnegan leaning with one elbow upon the instrument's casement, her chin resting in her hand.

"Oh," she said, her eyes the color of the sea on an overcast day. "Don't stop playing on my account."

"I suppose," he admitted sheepishly, "I got a bit carried away, did I?"

"Not at all. It was lovely. Beethoven, yes?"

"Quite. Seems as if it's been years since I heard any decent music played," he reflected.

"By decent music, I don't suppose you mean pipes." The look she was giving him, he felt, was more mischievous than mocking. Or perhaps that was merely wishful thinking.

Reilly felt himself flushing. "Pipes are all right," he said. "I mean, I haven't anything against them."

"But, being a Lowlander, you naturally prefer the music of your people."

His people. The Lowlanders. Was it, he wondered, always to be this way? Highlander versus Lowlander, in a battle for moral and cultural superiority? Was he, a Lowlander, never going to fit into this accursed place?

He gestured toward the keys. A slight change in subject might be in order. “Do you play?”

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m more scientifically than musically inclined.”

“Ah,” he said. “Yes, of course. As illustrated by the vomit story.”

She did not, he saw in the glow from the candle flames, blush. “Quite,” she said.

“Still,” Reilly said. “It isn’t difficult. Playing, I mean. Here, have a seat and I’ll show you.”

She regarded him archly. “I think I’ll stay where I am, thank you.”

“Don’t be daft,” he said. “It isn’t as if I’m trying to compromise you.”

“Oh, of course not. I quite forgot, you are as good as a married man.”

He blinked. “Am I?”

Then he remembered Christine. It seemed as if it had been a very long time indeed since he’d thought of her.

“Oh, yes, of course,” he said. “Yes, I suppose I am. As good as married. Well, as good as engaged, in any case.”

He saw no reason to mention to Brenna Donnegan the subtle shift his feelings for Christine had gone through since the morning after Hamish’s surgery—how she, who had never completely supported his intention to become a physician in the first place, had of late been less and less in his mind.

Instead, he slid as far as he could across the bench. “So have a seat.”

With a small inscrutable smile she did so, though there was hardly room for the two of them on the narrow bench, and her skirts and petticoats took up quite a lot of what little space there was.

“Right,” Reilly said. “Well, then, this is middle C.” He pressed down on the key. “It sticks a little, but nonetheless, this is the key I tend to orient myself by. You see, traveling up from middle C—” He ran his fingers over the keys. “—is one octave. Down is another.” He moved his fingers in the opposite direction. “Have you got that?”

She said, “I suppose so. Have the Marshalls left?”

“Yes, some time ago. Quite the dramatic exit you made there, by the way. However did you engineer the rat?”

“That was pure improvisation,” she said. “This place is always crawling with them in the spring. They get flooded out from the dungeons by the snow melting off the crags.”

“How pleasant. Well, good show, that. I believe it will distract them from the grave impropriety of your living in that cottage all alone. For a little while, anyway.” He ran his fingers over the keys. “So you understand middle C, then?”

“Indeed,” she said, gravely.

“Well,” he went on. “Once you know that, you can play anything, really. Let me see, what should you like to learn how to play?”

She shrugged. When she did this, he couldn’t help but notice, the tulle she wore around her shoulders shifted, revealing goodly more of her rather daring décolletage than he suspected she was aware.

“That thing you were playing before, I suppose,” she said.

“Oh, that? Cheerful little piece, isn’t it? Yes, that’s as good a place as any to begin. Here, give me your fingers.”

She did so, and he was reminded as he looked down at them of another time he’d held her hand against his own, comparing the size of their fingers. He felt that same queer spurt of emotion he’d felt then. It coursed through him, as quickly as Mrs. Murphy’s whisky, warming him from the top of his skull all the way down to his toes. He could not for the life of him imagine what it was about this woman that caused this odd physical reaction in him every time they touched. She was not the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, nor the most accomplished. She was certainly the most contrary, and he supposed that stood for something. And then there were those trousers. . . .

He did know that he was growing disturbingly attached to it. This feeling she gave him, that is, every time he came near her.

“Hold your hand like this,” he said, placing her fingers on the appropriate keys. “No, not all limp like that. Up.” He tickled her palm. “Like a rooftop. There you are. Now your other hand.”

When he had her fingers arranged on the keys correctly, he looked down at them and completely and utterly forgot how to play that sonata, or any other, for that matter.

She was waiting expectantly for him to proceed, holding her hands propped and ready. He could smell her scent, which was a far different one than she’d worn the last time he’d been this close to her. It was a perfume of some kind, light and clean smelling—not cloyingly flowery, like some women’s, or at all overpowering. When she turned her head to look at him, some of her soft hair brushed against his cheek, and the graceful turn of her throat directed his attention once again to the V formed by the fichu round her shoulders, a V that seemed to point directly toward the narrow valley between her high round breasts.

“Well?” she asked, her eyebrows raised. Her face, he couldn’t help noticing, was just inches from

his.

“I—” What was happening to him? He had never been this tongue-tied around a woman before. And that he should be so in front of this woman, who had caused him, for the most part, nothing but grief in the brief time that he’d known her. . . .

Well, something was wrong. Something was very wrong. Because he was far more conscious than he ought to be of her closeness, her warmth. The shape of her lips, soft and moistly red, seemed to be beckoning to him, urging him to press them with his own, while her gaze, steady and still with that hint of defiant archness with which she seemed habitually to regard him, never wavered. . . .

And before he knew it, his left arm was creeping around the small of her back in the most forward way imaginable, until his fingers were curving around her tapered waist, and he was leaning forward, hypnotically pulled by those inviting lips. . . .

Abruptly, she turned her head, threw back her shoulders, and began to move her fingers with brisk competence across the keys of the pianoforte.

“*Galley-rat sea*,” she sang, her husky contralto belting out the bawdy sea chanty without the least diffidence, “*Oh galley-rat sea, you won’t catch me near that galley-rat sea. Gay gals aloft and fancy men alee, that ain’t for me, that galley-rat sea—*”

Reilly, taken aback, realized that Miss Brenna Donnegal’s efficiency at the pianoforte was as great as his own, if not better, judging from the way her fingers fairly flew across the keys, picking out complicated chords. She smiled at him slyly over her bare shoulder as she sang, proving she did not even have to look at the keys, she knew them so well.

And why shouldn’t she smile, and slyly? It was quite the last song Reilly Stanton ever thought he’d hear from the lips of any woman professing to be a gentleman’s daughter.

“*Galley-rat sea.*” she went on, knowing several verses, it appeared, each worse than the last (in the usual tradition of sea chanties) and determined to sing all of them. “*Oh, galley-rat sea, I’ll spit on you if you spit on me—*”

Reilly could not imagine what she was about. She had known—he was quite certain she had known—that he’d been about to kiss her. The fact that she had known and had purposefully avoided the kiss irritated him far more than the fact that she knew how to play the pianoforte and had pretended not to.

In fact, it more than irritated him. It irked him considerably. She liked him. He knew she liked him. She’d as much as admitted it the other morning, when they’d stood on the pier together.

So what was she about, turning her head away just as he was about to kiss her, and singing a song about prostitutes and their procurers, of whom he could not believe she even knew, let alone felt comfortable enough to mention in his presence?

Well, he wasn't going to let her get away with it.

Determinedly, he circled her waist with his right hand as well, capturing her within the confines of both his arms, leaned down, and planted a kiss upon her mouth that he sincerely hoped would silence forever her opinions on that galley-rat sea.



To say that Brenna was surprised when Reilly Stanton kissed her—and so very adamantly—would be an understatement of the grossest kind. She had rather thought, when he'd been looking at her so intently just before she'd started playing, that that was what he meant to do.

And sad to say, her heart had begun to pound in her ears at the very thought of his mouth coming anywhere close to hers. She was not wearing a corset, having no maid to help her lace it, but she suddenly felt as breathless as if she'd been stuffed into one that was much, much too tight.

She tried berating herself. How could she allow herself to get so giddy and breathless just because a man looked as if he might like to kiss her? Why, she ought to be furious, outraged with him for even thinking of trying anything so impertinent.

But then she'd felt his arm slip around her, and . . .

Well, it had been as if the sun had come out after a month of rain. Her skin began to hum—or at least, that's how it seemed—and she became aware of parts of her body that she normally never gave a thought to. Like her ear lobes, for instance. Why Reilly Stanton putting his arm around her should make her conscious of her ear lobes, she could not imagine, but there it was. Suddenly, they felt heavy and tingly at the same time. . . .

And the problem was, it wasn't only her ear lobes that felt that way. Other parts of her body—parts she would vastly have preferred not to think about—felt the same way.

Lord Glendenning had put his arm around her dozens of times. Lord Glendenning had even kissed her. But her body had never, ever reacted to Lord Glendenning's advances the way it did when Reilly Stanton curled his hand around her waist. Her heart had begun to hammer even more loudly—so loudly she'd become convinced he could hear it, and would recognize her weakness for him.

Because yes, she admitted it now, she had a weakness for Reilly Stanton, a powerful weakness, and it wasn't just because he had the gentlest hands she had ever encountered, hands that had moved so expertly over little Hamish MacGregor when he'd been unconscious, hands that had been so deft and confident as they'd maneuvered hers over the pianoforte's keys.

No, Reilly Stanton, with his quick smile and even quicker wit, his gentle hands and even gentler dark eyes, was quite the most appealing man she had ever seen, and she'd wanted him to kiss her,

wanted him to kiss her in the worst way. . . .

And that powerful longing frightened her senseless.

And so she'd started singing the most ridiculous song she could think of, both to keep him from kissing her—because she couldn't let him kiss her; if she did, she'd start kissing him back, and she was almost certain she wouldn't be able to bring herself to stop—as well as to keep him from hearing the booming of her heart.

Only it hadn't worked. Because he was kissing her anyway, and it was everything she had hoped—and everything she had feared.

His lips, like his hands, were infinitely gentle, but also infinitely knowing, and they were doing things to her, those lips, things that were making the heavy weighted feeling in her ear lobes—and other places—much worse. Determined as she was not to let herself be affected by his kiss, she had met the onslaught of his lips stiffly, holding her mouth firmly closed.

But it only took one or two featherlight brushes of his tongue across her clamped lips before she felt her willpower dissolve. Suddenly, she was melting—not just her lips, either, but her whole body. If it hadn't been for his strong arms around her, she would, she was convinced, have slipped right off the piano bench, and into a puddle on the floor. She was opening to him, like a morning glory to the sun. And it wasn't fair! It wasn't fair that he could make her feel this way!

It wasn't fair, but it was delicious. Everything about this kiss was delicious, from the way Reilly Stanton's mouth tasted—sweet, like wine—to the way his strong, capable hands held her, the skin of his palms so hot, they seemed to singe her through the silk bodice of her gown. How was she supposed to resist anything as sweetly delectable as Reilly Stanton's kisses? No woman, she was convinced, could.

And why should she have to? Not when kissing Reilly Stanton felt so very right. Even his tongue, slipping slyly into her mouth, felt like something coming home, something she'd missed for a long time . . . and yet she'd never known the touch of a man's tongue against her own. All she knew was, it felt right.

Maybe that's why she did what she did next, which was turn toward Reilly on the piano bench, turn toward him and lift her arms so that they were around his neck, her fingers tangled in the hair at the back of his neck, the hair that had, as usual, come loose from the leather cord in which he habitually tied it back. Maybe that's why, as if she had morals looser than even Flora's, Brenna didn't object when she felt one of those hands at her waist begin to creep higher, until it was resting just beneath the curve of her left breast.

But that, too, seemed right. Because her breasts were one of the parts of her body that seemed to grow so heavy and tingly when he touched her. It was as if she *wanted* him to touch her there.

Good Lord, she really was a wanton thing. This was quite a shock because Brenna had always

thought of herself as a highly disciplined, terribly cerebral sort of person. It was quite astonishing to realize that she, who had always been ruled so entirely by her head, could be ruled by something else entirely.

And she was fairly certain that that something was her heart.

“Brenna,” Reilly Stanton broke their kiss to murmur. “Brenna . . .”

Why, she wondered irritably, was he wasting time with talking? There was no need for talking. They had done plenty of talking. Now was a time for kissing.

And she reached up to take his face in her hands and show him that, on no uncertain terms.

His reaction was most satisfactory. He let out a sort of groan and tightened his grip on her waist. The hand that had slid beneath her breast, however, did something wholly unexpected . . . and really quite gratifying. It settled over her breast, palming the heavy flesh.

Brenna had never allowed any man to touch her in that particular area of her body—not that many had tried. With the exception of Lord Glendenning, every other man she’d ever met had been rather too much in awe of her to attempt any such impertinence.

But now it became quite clear to her, in a way Brenna had never before understood, why it was that Flora, despite the abominable way the earl treated her, could not seem to stay away from him. If this was anything like what Flora experienced when Lord Glendenning laid his hands upon her, well, no wonder she couldn’t say no. Because it felt simply divine. . . .

And then, just when she was thinking to herself that nothing could be more delightful than being kissed in this manner by Reilly Stanton, that hand upon her breast grew even bolder—if such a thing were possible. For quite suddenly, those gentle, dexterous fingers dipped beneath the neckline of her gown, completely evading the fichu. A second later, Brenna knew for the first time what it was to feel a man’s bare flesh against her own.

The sensation elicited from her a little groan of appreciation, deep in the back of her throat. . . .

Her groan seemed to unleash something in Reilly Stanton that had apparently been just barely restrained. Suddenly, he appeared to want very much to press her body back against the piano bench and rain kisses all down her throat.

The problem, however, was that there was no more room on the piano bench.

Reilly solved that dilemma by simply scooping Brenna up and placing her so that her back was up against the casement of the pianoforte. What he failed to take into account when he did this, however, was that her bottom ended up resting against the keys, creating a rather loud discordant sound in the otherwise silent ballroom. . . .

And bringing Brenna, who'd sunk into some sort of passionate daze, right out of it.

What was she doing? What in the name of all that was reasoned and right was she doing, letting Reilly Stanton seduce her in Lord Glendenning's dilapidated ballroom? Was she out of her mind?

Clearly. Clearly she'd been driven from her senses by lust.

Well, fortunately, she'd realized it in time. With a single outraged motion, she placed both hands upon Reilly Stanton's chest and shoved.

It wasn't her fault that he was so taken by surprise that he fell backward over the piano bench, landing in a heap upon the floor.

He looked up at her from the midst of that heap with an expression of wounded—but clearly outraged—confusion.

“What'd you do *that* for?” he demanded, in a voice that didn't sound anything like his own. It seemed to travel up and down several octaves, and shook, besides.

Rather the way she found her hands shaking as she attempted to stuff her breast back into the bodice of her gown, from which it had been unloosed by those all too knowing, all too skillful fingers of his.

“You know perfectly well why,” Brenna said. She was surprised to find that her voice, too, was not particularly steady. She cleared her throat, but realized that was not the problem. It was her lips. They continued to tingle everywhere he'd touched them with his own.

Still seated on the floor, but looking less confused and more angry, Reilly said, “You seemed to be enjoying yourself, if I wasn't mistaken.”

She felt her cheeks heat up. Well, it was no good denying it. She had been enjoying herself, and she supposed that had been fairly obvious to him. Her nipples were still hard as twin corks, and it had nothing to do with the chill in the air. She folded her arms across her chest in case this fact was not hidden by the material of her gown.

“Of course I was enjoying myself,” she whispered. “That's just the point.”

Reilly squinted up at her. “Why are you whispering?”

“Are you mad? Because Lord Glendenning could walk in at any moment. You can't—we can't—be doing that. Not under his very roof. My God, if he knew, he'd kill you!”

Reilly shrugged and began climbing to his feet. “He could try,” he said, brushing dust from the seat of his breeches.

“Try? You think he carries that sword around for decoration?”

“Frankly,” Reilly said, “yes.”

“Well, not entirely. He’s quite good with it.”

Dr. Stanton’s only reply to this was a scowl.

“Really,” Brenna said, more gently. “We must not. What about your fiancée?”

If she had asked him, *What about your pet weasel?* it probably would have made about as much sense to Reilly at that particular moment, judging from the confused look on his face.

“My *what?*” he demanded.

“Your fiancée,” Brenna repeated. Her voice was less gentle now, and more icy. Good Lord. And she’d thought his kisses had a debilitating effect on *her*. The man could not even recall his own bride-to-be! “You do remember her, don’t you? It was because of her, you told me, that you came to Skye in the first place.”

“Yes,” Reilly affirmed. “But if you’ll recall, I also mentioned that she broke our engagement off.”

“But,” Brenna continued, doggedly, “you came here with the intention of proving to her that you aren’t a . . . what was it? Oh, yes. Wastrel. I beg your pardon, but I can’t help thinking that what we were just engaged in, the two of us, might fall under that category.”

He stared. “As a *waste?*”

“Absolutely. It wasn’t at all a good idea.” In fact, the farther he stood away from her, the more convinced she became of this fact. Really, but if he would just get a little distance from the matter, the way she had, he’d see that she was right. There was absolutely no point in the two of them doing . . . well, *that*. Not when he was going to return to London just as soon as he felt he’d adequately “proved” himself.

“I mean,” Brenna went on, not without some bitterness, “what good could come from it?” “

What good—” He broke off and simply glared at her. His dark eyes, normally so filled with good humor, were angry.

“No, you’re quite right,” he said, in a different sort of voice than she’d ever heard him use before. This one was filled with harsh bitterness. “Aside from my fiancée—not to mention Lord Glendenning and his broadsword—there is, of course, your grand experiment.”

She blinked at him. “What experiment?” she asked blankly.

“The one you’re conducting.” He swept out an arm. “Isn’t that what this island is to you? A massive research experiment? So that you can prove your theory?”

She still did not understand. “What theory?”

“About cholera,” he said. “For God’s sake, Brenna, don’t stand there and try to deny it. I saw the proof of it myself.”

“The proof of—” She shook her head. “Really, Dr. Stanton, I don’t know—”

“My God, my hand was just down the front of your dress. You can call me Reilly, for pity’s sake.” He ran his fingers through his hair, making the loose ends stand up against his shirt collar. “And the fact is, Brenna, I’ve seen it. The maps. The charts. The bottles of soil. The whole bit. So don’t stand there playing the innocent with me. I know what you’re up to.”

She blinked at him again.

And then she knew. Just like that, she knew what he’d done.

“But when—” she gasped.

“When you went to change your gown,” he said, in that same hostile tone. “You forgot to lock the door. So I went in. And I saw it.”

She felt as if someone had just poured a bucket of cold water down her back. She stared at him, transfixed.

“You went,” she murmured, through lips that were no longer tingly, but numb. “You went into the . . . *study*?”

“The laboratory, you mean? Yes, I went in there.” He glanced at her expression, then made a face. “Oh, you needn’t trouble yourself. I couldn’t make hide nor hair of your handwriting. I couldn’t steal your information, even if I wanted to. Which, believe me, I don’t care to.”

Brenna couldn’t believe it. She was as shocked as if he had slapped her. He had gone into her study. Her father’s private study. No one had ever gone in there. No one but her and her father. And he—Reilly Stanton—had stood there, and . . . and . . .

“It’s no business of mine, Brenna,” he said, “but if that’s what you’re risking your reputation for—coming back here to the island against your family’s wishes, traipsing around in graveyards after dark so no one will know what you’re up to, spending hours locked in that little cramped room, analyzing clumps of dirt, all in an effort to prove some harebrained theory of your father’s—”

She felt tears prick the corners of her eyes. Good Lord, what was the matter with her? She wasn’t going to *cry*, was she, because of something this know-it-all said? How ridiculous! Worse than ridiculous. Ludicrous, that’s what it was.

“And what do you know about it?” she demanded, hotly. “You might know a lot about trephines,

and the like, but what do you know about disease and how it's spread?"

"I know that the last man who tried to introduce a theory like yours got himself laughed right out of the profession." Reilly's gaze was steady . . . and unreadable. "Drummed from his college, he was, and he'd been a fairly well-respected voice in the medical community up until then. His work on typhoid was considered some of the finest. . . ."

His voice trailed off. While he'd been speaking, Brenna had furtively dashed the tears from her eyes. All trace, she hoped, of hurt was gone from her face.

But Reilly stopped speaking anyway. She realized why when she glanced into his face and saw the sudden dawning of comprehension there.

"My God," Reilly murmured. "That man . . . the one who tried to claim cholera—and typhoid, too—were not caused by miasmas. That was . . . that was *your father*?"

She took a deep breath. It was hard, due to the lump in her throat, but she managed.

"Yes," she said, with as much dignity as she could gather. "That was my father."

Reilly, to his credit, looked ashamed of himself. "That's why he left the country."

"That isn't," Brenna said, indignantly. "He doesn't care what they said. He knows he's right. He just can't prove it. He left for the reason I told you, to go to India, which he believes is where cholera first originated and do further research on his theory."

Then she let out a bitter laugh. "That's what he told us, of course. But if you want the truth, Dr. Stanton, I think he left out of disgust. Disgust with the medical community as a whole. You people, with your pompous self-righteousness—"

Reilly did not protest, but he did say, "I never attended one of your father's lectures. I never heard what, precisely, his theory was—"

"Well, don't worry, you will," Brenna said. "Because I happen to know that all that was wrong with it was that he presented it too early, before he had the necessary evidence to back it. He thought, you see, that he had stumbled onto something terribly important, something the medical community—the entire world—needed to know about straightaway. But he didn't have the proof, you see. Or at least not enough of it to satisfy the narrow-minded bureaucrats who control the medical establishment at large.

"Well, when I'm through here on Skye," Brenna went on staunchly, "he'll have all the proof he needs to support his theory, and all of those men who laughed at him will have to admit that all of this time, when they might have been preventing the spread of this disease, they've only been allowing it to fester and grow, and all because of their stupid pride. . . ."

Reilly said, “Really, Brenna, you cannot think that any man would knowingly shoot down a theory that might, as you claim, prevent the spread of a devastating disease—”

“Oh, can’t I? If it means that hundreds of other men will have to admit that all along, they’ve been wrong? Oh, yes, Dr. Stanton, I think men in your profession—or any profession, really—would do just about anything in order not to look a fool. And that’s what my father’s theory makes them all appear: fools. That scared them, and so they killed it. Which is why I’m here, Dr. Stanton. To show them they were wrong. To prove it to the world. To keep my father’s theory alive.”

Reilly shook his head. He seemed to be having trouble processing what she was telling him.

“But Brenna,” he said. “*Cholera*. I mean, surely, if he knew, your father wouldn’t want you putting yourself in the path of such a dangerous and inexplicable dis—”

“Of course he wouldn’t,” she snapped, impatiently. “But someone has to, haven’t they? And why not me? Because I’m a woman, you mean? Please, Dr. Stanton. I think we established the first time we met that women are imminently as capable as men are of providing worthy medical care. It stands to reason that we can also pull our fair weight in the research and eradication of contagious disease. Don’t you agree?”

How Reilly Stanton might have replied, Brenna never knew. Because at that moment, footsteps were heard in the corridor outside the ballroom. A second later, Lord Glendenning’s large frame filled the doorway.

“Brenna?” he called. Then, his eyes adjusting to the light from the candelabra that still burned atop the pianoforte’s casement, he said, “Oh, there you are. With Stanton, too, I see.”

Brenna looked from earl to physician. Lord Glendenning’s penchant for stating the obvious was, at times, rather taxing.

“Indeed,” was all she said, however.

“I suppose,” the earl said, mournfully, “that you’re still angry with me.”

Brenna rolled her eyes. Really, but was it entirely necessary her temper be tested beyond all endurance in a single evening?

“I’m not particularly happy with you at the moment, my lord,” was all she said, however.

“I thought as much.” Lord Glendenning sounded dejected. “I suppose you want Stanton to take you home, then.”

“I can find my own way home, actually,” Brenna replied. “So if you gentlemen will excuse me . . .”

“No!”

Both men, to her utter disbelief, leaped into her path, making further retreat impossible.

“I’ll take you,” Reilly Stanton said, quickly. “In the phaeton.”

“It’s *my* phaeton,” Glendenning said irritably. “*I’ll* take you.”

Brenna looked from one man to the other. She wasn’t at all certain, at that moment, whom she despised more—Lord Glendenning, for making a fool out of her in front of the minister and his wife, or Reilly Stanton, for . . .

Well, she was not really certain what she was angry with Reilly Stanton for. She only knew that he had made her, for the first time in her life, feel unsettled about herself and her goals. They were admirable, worthy goals, she felt. Perhaps not the sort other girls her age might have, but then, other girls her age did not seem to be bothered by the sort of bedeviling curiosity, the thirst for knowledge and academic proofs that troubled her.

On the other hand, thanks to Reilly Stanton’s kisses, she was beginning to see that the mysteries of the heart could be just as troubling as those of science.

And she was starting to think that the latter might not be nearly as satisfying in their resolutions.

But the fact remained that she had a task to perform—a vitally important one—and she could not let her feelings for Reilly Stanton—or anything else, for that matter—get in the way.

Accordingly, she said with some asperity, “You may *both* see me home.”

And, to her very great annoyance, they both did so.



“ ‘ *T* is just a little ways more,” the child assured him. Reilly Stanton nodded. He wasn’t paying the slightest bit of attention to where he was or what he was doing. He was, instead, thinking about Brenna Donnegan.

Unfortunately, it seemed that as of late he did little else. Brenna Donnegan was always on his mind in one way or another, either because she’d referred one of her patients to him—as she’d promised she would; whatever else had passed between them, she had, at least, stuck to her word about that—or because he happened to see something that reminded him of her—which, as it happened, was pathetically often.

And, disturbingly, all manner of things reminded him of Brenna Donnegan. Not just the sorts of things that one might expect, either, considering that she had, in fact, spurned him. Blisters and carbuncles, certainly. Anything requiring an unguent. Festering wounds tended to bring Brenna Donnegan springing to mind. These thoughts were, he felt, natural and just.

But lately, something disturbing had been happening. Reilly had begun to become equally prone to think of Brenna Donnegan when spying a lark wheeling through the sky or a primrose peeping out from a fissure between two stones as he was when faced with any sort of unsightly medical ailment. What, he wondered, could be the meaning behind this maudlin sentimentality? And for a woman he was quite convinced he actively disliked—in spite of his thoroughly inexplicable physical attraction to her.

But there it was. He pictured Brenna Donnegan’s face when the soup he’d placed upon the fire boiled over and when he found burrs in his stockings. But he pictured it equally as often when he gazed into the fire at night, before falling asleep, and when he saw the sunlight slanting in through his windows in the morning when he woke.

To be honest, he supposed he thought about Brenna Donnegan all of the time.

But that, he told himself, was only natural, under the circumstances. Hadn’t he finally come to the realization that Christine had been all wrong for him? There was an empty place in his heart now that needed filling.

He might, he knew, have filled that empty place readily enough back in London. That town, as opposed to this accursed rock, was filled with attractive, unattached young women. And now that he

no longer cared what Christine thought of him, there'd be no shame, no shame at all, in going back.

So why hadn't he begun making plans to leave?

He knew the answer . . . but that didn't mean he liked it. No, he knew why he hadn't left Skye yet, and it had nothing to do with Christine.

It wasn't even because of Brenna Donnegan. At least, not entirely. No, it was this place. This place was getting to him. The chatter of the schoolchildren as they passed the dispensary's windows; the immense breadth of sky that seemed to stretch out limitlessly above his head, uninterrupted by chimney or rooftop; the clean, sharp scent of brine in the air, rather than the clogging smoke of London. . . . The thought of going back there, back to London, after having grown used to all of this, filled him with dread.

And yet go back he must, at least eventually. He couldn't spend the rest of his life on Skye. He was the Marquis of Stillworth, for God's sake. There were people with prior claims to his allegiance than the people of Skye.

Though the tenant farmers at Stillworth Park hardly needed him the way the villagers of Lyming did.

But they, he told himself firmly, had Brenna. They had got on well enough under Brenna's care before he'd ever set foot on Skye. They would get on well enough after he was gone.

He told himself this. He seemed to be having some trouble believing it, however.

The only thing he supposed that he ought to be thankful for was that she hadn't slapped him. She could have, and been more or less within her rights. He had behaved, he realized, with extraordinary indiscretion that night at Castle Glendenning. He still wasn't exactly sure what had come over him. Never before in his life had he lost control like that.

He had been aware, of course, that he felt an attraction to Brenna Donnegan. No one could deny that she was a thoroughly desirable woman. But that didn't, of course, excuse his perfectly inexplicable behavior the night of Lord Glendenning's evening party. Why, he had acted with an utter lack of decorum worthy of . . . well, Pearson, actually. Or worse, Shelley. The two of *them* would think nothing of attempting to debauch a woman on a pianoforte.

But Reilly had never done anything like it in his life. Miss Donnegan, for all her self-assurance, was an innocent young woman, of whom he'd taken unfair advantage. She hadn't anyone to protect her from foul creatures like himself, who might choose to prey upon her, defenseless as she was.

Still, knowing that full well, he had pressed himself upon her, with all the brutish persistence of . . . well, of Lord Glendenning, actually.

It was unconscionable, really. Was living out here, so far from civilization, turning him into a

savage, just like Iain MacLeod? What was next? Would he start wearing a kilt soon, and impregnating barmaids?

“ ’Tis just around this bend,” the child informed him, glancing anxiously back over her shoulder—or maybe the child was a boy. Whatever it was, it was so covered in grime that its sex was indiscriminable. Reilly had never seen this particular ragamuffin before, and he’d thought, given his propensity for handing out candy from his dispensary, he’d seen every child in Lyming at least once. This one, however, could not have been attending the village school with any regularity. The schoolmaster, who was a strict, though not unkind, man, surely would have sent her—or him—straight to Reilly for delousing.

“Right,” Reilly said, to assure the child he was still in the game. If game was what it was. The lad—or lass—hadn’t been particularly coherent when describing just why, precisely, Reilly’s talents were called for. The word “Mam” had been mentioned several times, and Reilly was sincerely hoping he would not be called upon to perform any sort of emergency delivery. He still much preferred those cases be referred to Brenna Donnegal.

But he supposed he couldn’t afford to be choosy. It was a miracle, actually, she was still allowing him any patients at all, after what he’d done to her—much less what he’d admitted to her, his having been inside her precious study, which seemed to have offended her far more than the fact that his hand had ever been down the front of her dress.

Still, he had dutifully handed over that bloody letter Glendenning had absconded. Slipped it to her as soon as the earl wasn’t looking, on their ride back to Burn Cottage. A person would think that would count for something, at least.

But it had not, apparently, done the slightest bit of good. No, it was clear he oughtn’t have said anything about the bloody study at all. Only he had been so hurt—so laughably hurt—when she’d looked at him with those great blue eyes and asked him what good could come from it—the two of them being together, that is.

Even now he grew angry, just thinking about. *What good could come from it?* What did she *think*?

Although he supposed he could see it from her point of view. What had he intended, anyway? Brenna Donnegal wasn’t, of course, the kind of woman a man made his mistress—even if the physician in a village the size of Lyming could get away with having a mistress, which he most certainly could not. And marriage was of course out of the question. Why, he’d only just escaped that particular shackle, and don’t think he didn’t thank his lucky stars every night for it.

Still, after that searing kiss . . . well, Reilly’s ideas about marriage had begun going through a reevaluation. Marriage to a woman who kissed with as much enthusiasm as Brenna Donnegal—and who didn’t complain afterward about his mussing up her hair or not having shaved—might be a bird of an entirely different feather than marriage to a woman like Miss Christine King. . . .

But apparently the advantages of such a union had not occurred to Brenna Donnegal. Apparently,

she was so completely caught up in her damned cholera research, she had time to think of nothing else. Most assuredly not of the sort of things a girl her age ought to be thinking about, like dresses and parties and beaux. Beaux. Ha! She certainly didn't seem to give two figs about ever acquiring any of those. He was dead positive his were the first lips ever to have traversed that particular territory—or at least with any sort of success.

Well, as it happened, her reaction had been all for the best. Considering her feelings on the aristocracy—at least so far as their involvement with the medical community—it was hardly likely she'd have taken the news that he was, in fact, a marquis, with any sort of grace. What had he been thinking, anyway? That he, the eighth Marquis of Stillworth, was going to marry this half-wild girl he'd met in the Hebrides? Oh, that was the last thing he needed. He couldn't even imagine what his mother would have said if he'd brought Brenna back to London with him and introduced her as the new Lady Stillworth—though damned if those blue eyes of hers wouldn't put the Stillworth sapphires to shame. Queen Boadicea, indeed, she'd look with those rocks round her long white neck. . . .

Still, his sisters would undoubtedly have conniptions over Brenna's seemingly uncontrollable mane of red hair—not to mention her propensity to swill whisky straight from the bottle, when provoked—and as for Pearson and Shelley . . . well, there was no telling how long those two would have waxed eloquent over the inappropriateness of the new wife of the Marquis of Stillworth.

But even so . . .

Even so, he did not think he would have minded such a wife. When she wasn't blathering over her mad ideas about proving her father's bloody theory about bloody cholera and its bloody spread, Brenna was all that was reasonable and intelligent and good-humored and lovely—God only knew how lovely she was. And kissing her that evening had been one of the most exquisite experiences of his life. And he was no stranger to kissing—though, to be sure, most of his partners had had considerably more experience at it than Miss Brenna Donnegal.

But what did experience matter when there was so much emotion—pure, unadulterated emotion? He had felt it, waves of it, pouring from her when he'd kissed her. It would be presumptuous, he supposed, to call what he'd felt from her love. . . .

But he was damned sure it hadn't been disinterest. Had it, he wondered, only been lust? For Brenna Donnegal was certainly a very lusty girl—and damn his luck for ever having fallen into her path.

Well, it hardly mattered. Whatever it was that had passed between the two of them, it was over now. His stupid admission had seen to that. The fact that he'd seen the inner sanctum—the area where all of her great research into this ludicrous theory of her father's was conducted—was, in her eyes, an unforgivable sin. As if he'd really *want* to steal the old man's bloody theory. It had got him laughed right out of the Royal Fellows.

But how was he to have helped himself? It had seemed the most natural thing in the world to creep into the room the second he'd realized she'd left the door unlocked, and that she was well occupied at

the other side of the house.

His disappointment at finding only several maps of Lyming, with cryptic markings scrawled across them, hung upon the walls, and a few journals scattered here and there, had been profound. No monster here. Not even an opium den. Just the indecipherable scrawls of a scientist—quite possibly a mad one.

Still, he shouldn't have mentioned that he'd seen it. Because now she wasn't even speaking to him.

Although that was probably just as well. Because if simply kissing her had driven him to such levels of passion that he'd forgotten himself so completely and tried—well, he believed that if she hadn't stopped him, he might have tried to deflower her, right there on the pianoforte—then it was far better they stay out of one another's way.

“This way,” the voice, belonging to the sexless little creature before him, said.

Reilly, on the back of the horse Lord Glendenning had loaned him—a placid animal well used to the craggy slopes up which Reilly, of necessity, had to climb each day in order to make his calls—had to duck to pass beneath some vines hanging from a rocky outcropping through which, apparently, the child's home was to be found.

And there it was, if home was the word for it. A dilapidated shack, the roof of which was made, if he wasn't mistaken, of slabs of rock insulated with peat, situated in the center of a gully between two massive rock formations. The inhabitants were certainly protected from attack. But not just because of the shack's secluded location. No, the smell, even from this far away, was so overpowering as to have turned away even the most dedicated Hun. Human refuse, mingled with, if he wasn't mistaken, whisky. Well, wasn't that pleasant? The child's father was apparently running a distillery from his home.

It was a miracle the place hadn't exploded.

“But you don't actually *live* here?” Reilly couldn't help asking his guide. He was hoping that perhaps the child would say, “No, sir, this is just where we keep the pigs,” for he saw several of them, nosing about a grassless yard.

But the child replied, “Aye,” with a look that said, “Daft Lowlander.”

His heart sinking, Reilly nodded to the child, who scampered down the rocks, calling, “Mam! Mam! The doctor's here!”

There was no sign that “Mam”—or anyone else, for that matter—heard the child's cries. Smoke was drifting from a rough-hewn chimney in the center of the stone roof, so someone, anyway, was at home. Noting that the weather, which had been fine when he had originally set out that morning, had begun to turn unpleasant, with overcast sky and distinctly unspringlike chill, Reilly heaved a sigh and swung himself from his mare's back. It wasn't until he'd reached up to undo the medical bag he'd

strapped to the saddle that he felt the first fat drop of rain on the back of his neck.

“Oh,” he said to the horse, who’d begun placidly to rip up weeds from the base of the rocks. “Lovely.”

His guide had disappeared into the shack. Reilly glumly followed, wondering how much protection a peat and stone roof afforded from Skye rain, which was quite unlike London rain. Rain on the Isle of Skye was wetter, somehow, wetter and colder than any other rain Reilly had ever experienced. He supposed this was because it was clean, as there weren’t enough coal fires on the island to clog the sky above them with acrid smoke and noxious fumes.

The fact that the rain was clean, however, was small comfort when he felt it pelting his hat brim.

“Hello?” he called, when he came to the low-hanging doorway, across which, in place of a door, hung a threadbare blanket. Since there was no wood to knock upon, Reilly tried calling again.

“Hello, anybody there? It’s Dr. Stanton. . . .”

Hearing, though indistinctly, a murmur he thought might have been the words “come in,” Reilly did so, lifting the tattered blanket and ducking beneath it.

It took a moment or two for his vision to adjust enough to the shack’s gloom to make out anything inside it. When he could, he saw what appeared to be an old woman, clustered around whom were approximately half a dozen quietly weeping children in various states of undress. The smell—of burnt porridge, he thought—was quite overwhelming. Their parents not apparently being able to afford clothing for them, the youngest children went without—and that included diapers, as well, which explained the other odor he discerned.

“Well, then,” Reilly said, thinking, not without some regret, of the comfortable homes belonging to his patients back in Mayfair—the green leather armchairs into which he’d admonished to rest himself, the sherries he’d been poured. “What seems to be the trouble, Madam? One of the children taken ill?”

Then his guide moved away from the fire—a low, barely distinguishable glow of a fire, and went to the blanket that hung across the door. She moved it—Reilly had decided his guide had to be a girl, since her hair was considerably longer than the children he saw now, who were undeniably male—and some of the gray light from outside lit the interior of the hovel. Suddenly, Reilly saw that the woman about whom the children were gathered had a gash in her lip which had already begun to purple and swell, and a similar one just above her left eye.

He started to say something not at all appropriate to utter in front of women or children, and only managed to stop himself just in time. Instead, he said, “Ho, there. I see. You—” This to the girl in the doorway. “Keep holding that blanket back, there’s a lass. Have you a place nearby where one might fetch some clean water? And something to carry it in?”

The child nodded gravely. Reilly said, “Good. Can you send some of your brothers and sisters to

do that, then?"

Obediently, the girl, said, "Dorcas, you heard 'im. Take the bucket."

One of the less ill-clad children who'd been hiding behind her mother darted from the hovel, taking with her a much begrimed bucket and two of her siblings.

There wasn't much use, Reilly supposed, in asking for rags with which he might wipe up the woman's blood. If there had been any about, they would have been used as diapers for the younger children. With resignation, Reilly placed his medical bag on what he supposed served as the family's dining table—if the few maggot-ridden crusts upon it were any indication—and fished out some sponges he kept there.

"All right, then," he said, kneeling beside the woman. "Let me see what we have here."

Now that his eyes had grown accustomed to the dimness inside the shanty, he saw that the woman was not as old as he'd first thought. In fact, he'd put her at his own age, maybe even a little younger. She looked at him apologetically.

"I told 'er not to fetch ye," the woman said, not very coherently. She was missing more than a few teeth—although he did not think they had been recently knocked out.

"I'm very glad she did," Reilly said. He sponged gently at the blood on the woman's lip, hoping to determine how deep the cut there might be. "I thought I had met all the residents of Lyming, but I see that I was wrong. I've never met you before, have I?"

The woman shook her head, which made it difficult for Reilly to continue sponging.

"We canna pay," she said, with some urgency. "We canna pay you."

"That's all right," Reilly said. "Hold still now. . . . I'm afraid you might need a few stitches above this eye here. That's quite a nasty cut. May I ask how you came about it?"

"Dinna you hear? We canna pay."

"And I said that was quite all right. Will you do me a great favor and follow my finger with your eyes, please? Don't move your head. Just your eyes." Reilly held his index finger in front of the woman's face and watched as her gaze followed it. "Good. Now, Mrs. . . . you know, I'm afraid I didn't quite catch your name."

"Mackafee."

Reilly raised his eyebrows. He'd heard of the Mackafees. He wasn't certain where, precisely—no, yes he was. Adam MacAdams had called someone in the bar where Reilly had spent his first night in Lyming a Mackafee—only that hadn't been the fellow's name. MacAdams had called him that as sort

of a joke, because the fellow had not gone out in his fishing boat that day, having felt ill. In Lymington, he had noticed, any lazy or shiftless person was referred to as a Mackafee.

For reasons which were becoming only too clear to Reilly.

“Well, then,” Reilly said, after he’d patched, to the best of his ability, the woman’s wounds. Her children had returned with the water and stood around watching his every move, the way, back in London, children had stood gazing at the tigers in their cage at the zoo.

And truthfully, Reilly felt rather like a tiger, with every passing moment. The conditions in which this woman and her children lived were absolutely atrocious. Not only hadn’t they, as far as he could tell, adequate amounts of clothing to wear and food to eat, but the roof leaked, and there was no sign of a privy anywhere. What’s more, Reilly’s examination of the woman had revealed that her brood was about to expand once again.

But that was not the worst of it. No, the worst was that, though Mrs. Mackafee told him she’d come by her wounds from a fall, Reilly knew it had been knuckles, and not the ground, that had caused her swollen lip and purpling eye. And he knew that the knuckles at fault belonged not to some stranger, but to Mr. Mackafee, sure as Sunday.

Still, he did not mention these suspicions aloud . . . not until he was preparing to leave. He was instructing young Dorcas and her sister in the appropriate care for their mother’s wounds—“This ointment is to be applied twice every day, and the wounds must be kept clean, understand? If she seems the least bit groggy or ill, you must come and fetch me at once.”—when it finally became too much for him, and he said in a low voice to his little guide, whose name, he’d managed to discover, was Shannon, “I do need to know how this happened. To her face. Was it your father?”

To which the little girl replied, with downcast eyes, “Aye.”

“Fine,” Reilly said, laying a reassuring hand upon her spindly shoulder. “You were right to tell me. Now here. Do you know what this is?”

The girl looked down at the gold sovereign he’d lain in her grubby palm. “Do I,” she breathed.

“Good. Then I want you to take some of your brothers—not Dorcas. Leave her here to care for your mam—and go into town and see Mrs. Murphy. She owns the alehouse by the pier—”

The child nodded eagerly. “I know ’er. She gives us her day-old bread.”

“Excellent. Give Mrs. Murphy the coin and tell her Dr. Stanton sent you. She’ll give you some bread and eggs and meat and things in a basket, and then you can all enjoy a nice hot supper tonight. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

The girl’s fingers closed over the coin. It disappeared in her filthy fist. “*Like it,*” she said, in a fierce little voice.

“Fine, then.” Reilly straightened and looked out into what had become a steadily pouring rain. Keeping his voice even, he asked, “And where might I find your father, then, Shannon?”

Her father, Shannon informed him, could be found where he spent most of his time, at his distillery, located just down the ravine from their cottage—which was how she referred to the structure they stood in, a rather optimistic assertion, to Reilly’s mind.

Still, he thanked the girl, wished her mother well once more, then put his hat back on and strode out into the rain. . . .

But instead of going to his horse, he followed what she called the ravine—really a trickle of muddy water that flowed past the shack and down toward another gully between the rock formations . . . in which, Reilly saw after only a little climbing, there sat a lean-to made of sticks, peat, and rock.

Beneath this lean-to, beside the workings of a singularly amateurish and not particularly hygienic-looking distillery, toiled a large, rawboned man.

Though toiled might not have been the right word for what Mr. Mackafee was engaged in when Reilly came across him. For though he was, technically speaking, working, what he was working at appeared to be tasting his product.

A product he did not seem particularly anxious to share, since, upon spying Reilly through the rain, Mackafee said only, “Git away, there,” and that not very lucidly, as he seemed to have sampled a goodly portion more of his product than was, perhaps, advisable.

“You’re Mackafee, then, are you?” Reilly asked, as the rain poured steadily all around him, soaking the shoulders of his coat and his trouser legs, and flowing off his hat brim.

“Mebbe,” was the fellow’s laconic reply.

But that was entirely enough of a reply for Reilly, who trod calmly through the mud toward the lean-to, saying as he approached, “I’m Stanton, the new physician. I’ve just been to see your wife, whom you apparently saw fit to give a thorough beating.”

“What if I did?” demanded Mackafee. “She’s mine to beat if I want to.”

Feeling suddenly quite cheerful in spite of the rain, Reilly declared, “I was hoping you’d say something like that.”

Then he split his knuckles to the bone by ramming them as hard as he could into Mackafee’s insipid mouth.

“See there?” Reilly said, as Mackafee, who’d landed on the ground with his rear end in a vast mud puddle, put a hand to his bleeding mouth and swore colorfully. “See how that feels? There’ll be more

of the same, my good fellow, if I hear you've raised your hand to your wife again. Understand?"

"I understand," Mackafee lisped at him. "I understand that I'll get you for this! See if I don't!"

But since it came out sounding like "Thee if I dunna," Reilly was hardly alarmed.

Later it occurred to him that it would have been just as painful for Mackafee, and less so for himself, if he had simply aimed for the fellow's nose. But at the time he felt quite satisfied with the way the thing had gone—at least until he turned around to go back to his horse and found Brenna Donnegal standing there with her mouth hanging open.

It was the first time he had seen her since that night in the castle when he'd acted with so very little discretion. Well, that wasn't so. He had seen her in the village, when she'd come to call on Hamish, who was doing well enough that Reilly had, just the week before, sent him home. Still, she had gone quite out of her way to avoid speaking to Reilly during those occasions they had encountered one another.

But now . . . well, now she had no choice. She could not avoid him if she wanted to. He had assured himself that when next he spoke with Brenna Donnegal, he was going to behave with the sort of gentlemanly decorum that befitted a fellow of his rank and bearing.

He did not, of course, ever consider that the next time he saw her, he would be standing with a set of bleeding knuckles in several inches of mud, having just struck the inebriated spouse of one of his patients.

"You—" She had, he could tell from her expression, apparently witnessed the whole thing. He did not think her speechlessness was due to admiration of his boxing skills, however. "What did you—" It was, he thought, one of the few times he had ever seen her at a loss for words. "You can't just—"

"I can, and I did." Reilly, forced into action, strode forward to take her firmly by the arm and propel her back toward the shack. "So be a good girl, and come along."

"But you—" Brenna kept looking back over her shoulder at old Mackafee, who was kneeling in the ravine with his hands to his mouth, still swearing, although not at all comprehendingly, due to his newly missing teeth. "You can't just—"

"Brenna, there are some things that you, as a woman, simply cannot—"

He knew before the words were fully out of his mouth that this was the wrong tack to take, as she immediately wrenched her arm from his grasp and hissed, "Don't you *dare* to—"

Oh, really, he thought to himself. This was simply too tiring. Here he'd been practicing what he was going to say to her next time he saw her—he had a very nice speech rehearsed, all about how two people, when thrust together by circumstance, might do or say things they later regretted, but that did not necessarily mean they couldn't remain friends. . . .

But there she was, looking so absurdly pretty, with her flushed cheeks and flashing blue eyes, and his carefully prepared speech flew right out of his head. Friends. Bah! He did not want to be friends with Brenna Donnegan.

At least, not the kind of friends who didn't kiss, and on a fairly regular basis.

And so he did what he thought he had to in order to remove her, as quickly as possible, from this horrible place, and to somewhere warm and dry, where they might discuss this and other such topics: all it took was a shoulder to her mid-section and an arm to anchor her flailing legs about the hips, and he had her off her feet. He set off down the gully toward his horse, by which, he saw through the rain, Brenna had tied hers. She was not, he found, a particularly weighty burden, for all her height.

She was, however, quite noisy.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded furiously. "Put me down. Are you mad? I have never in all my life—"

"Be quiet," Reilly said, thinking as blows from her fists rained down upon his back, that she really did have quite a strong punch, for a girl. "You've completely spoiled any hope I might have had at making a dignified exit in front of that man."

"Dignified?" Brenna, even with her head hanging upside down, managed to sound queenly in her contempt for him. "My God, you just struck him. How is that dignified?"

"I told you—" Reilly picked his way carefully across some particularly muddy terrain. "It's something you simply wouldn't understand. A private matter, actually, between Mr. Mackafee and myself."

Brenna said a word that caused his eyebrows, beneath his sodden hat brim, to rise. Really, but she was not at all one to hide her feelings—a fact that was bound to make life at Stillworth Park, if he was ever able to induce her to come there, highly entertaining.

"You hit him because you saw how he treats his wife, and it upset you," she accused him, hoarsely. "But treating him the way he treats his wife isn't going to change anything. He's only going to be in a fouler mood than ever when he sobers up, and then he's going to take it out on her."

"No," Reilly said confidently. "He won't."

"He will, Reilly."

Noting—and with a curious pang in the vicinity of his heart—that she had used his given name for the first time, Reilly smiled.

"He won't," he said again. "And hitting that blighter certainly made me feel better, so how could it

have been wrong?"

"You," Brenna declared, "are hopeless. Put me down now, will you please?"

Having reached their horses, he concluded that it was unlikely Brenna was going to go running back to Mackafee and offer him any sort of aid, and so he did as she asked, depositing her more gently than he thought she deserved, considering how thoroughly she had ruined his grand exit.

But Brenna did not seem impressed by his gingeriness with her person, and exercised no such restraint herself upon being set free. She gave him a series of hard little pushes, each one accompanied by a syllable as she said, "Don't . . . you . . . ever . . . do . . . that . . . again!"

She'd backed him up against the warm body of his mare, who lifted her head from the grass she was nibbling and looked at them both curiously.

"Well," Reilly said, "I wouldn't have had to, if you hadn't come round to check up on me."

"I wasn't—" She snapped her mouth shut. Her hair, he noted, for once was contained, due to the fact that the rain had plastered her curls to her face. She was dressed once again in those familiar trousers, though she'd slipped over them a large and clearly ancient macintosh, which fit her about as alluringly as a tent.

It didn't matter, however. Brenna Donnegal could wear a wheat sack, and she'd still be beautiful.

Contrary, though. Awfully contrary.

"I wasn't checking up on you," she began, again, testily. "Mrs. Murphy told me she saw Shannon go into the dispensary, and I thought . . . well, I knew you hadn't encountered the Mackafees before, and I thought I had better—"

"Check up on me," Reilly finished for her drily.

She frowned. "All right, yes, if you're going to be that way about it. And a good thing I did, too. Reilly, you don't understand men like Harold Mackafee—"

"Don't understand brutes who beat their wives and fail to see that their children are adequately fed and clothed?" Going to stand beside Willow, Brenna's mare, he held out his hand. "No, you're right, I don't."

Brenna said, "The Mackafees have been the disgrace of Lyming for generations. Harold Mackafee, like his father and his father's father, runs a still, but never manages to sell any of his whisky because he drinks it all himself. He poaches off Lord Glendenning's land, and Lord Glendenning lets him because otherwise those children would never get anything at all to eat. The church and the village try to help as best they can with gifts of food and clothing, but that's all anyone can do, Reilly. Harold Mackafee won't change, no matter how many times you hit him. What you did back there—it might

have made you feel better, but it won't change anything. And why are you holding your hand out like that?"

"To help you," Reilly said, with dignity, "into the saddle."

Brenna rolled her eyes, and eschewing the use of his hand, swung herself up into her saddle unaided. She did, however, once firmly seated, reach down and flip his hand over, so that rain pelted his lacerated knuckle, causing him to wince, as she examined the wound.

She made a tisk-tisking sound, then released his hand.

"My father," she said gravely, "always hit Harold Mackafee in the stomach. Much less hard on the fist, he said."

Reilly, surprised, started to say something—though he hardly knew what—but she cut him off.

"I'll dress that, if you want," she offered.

Then she wheeled her horse around, and took off at a brisk trot, not even glancing over her shoulder to see whether or not he followed.

But he did. Of course he did. How could he not?



What was she doing?

Was she crazy? She thought she must be. She'd have to be, to have agreed to bandage Reilly Stanton's torn and bloodied knuckles.

She had decided, after that incident in Lord Glendenning's ballroom, that it would be better for everyone if she simply stayed as far as she possibly could from Reilly Stanton. After all, she had her work to do, and he had his, and there wasn't any reason, really, for the two of them ever to meet—at least, not alone. Not ever again.

It was infinitely wiser that they didn't. Meet, that is. Because that would mean that what inevitably seemed to happen whenever she was in Reilly Stanton's presence—the uncontrollable blushes, the wildly beating heart—wouldn't.

She simply couldn't afford, at this stage in her research, to allow herself to become distracted. Not by anything. Most particularly a handsome young London physician who did things—oh, such things!—with his hands and who seemed able to make her heart sing with only the slightest glance. . . .

But who was, as she knew only too well, going to return to London just as soon as he'd proved to himself—and to his fiancée—what a brilliant and self-sacrificing man of medicine he actually was.

No. It was better that she stayed far, far away from Reilly Stanton.

And she had, up until now, been doing quite a good job at keeping her distance from him. So long as he stuck to his dispensary and she stuck to Burn Cottage, there was very little chance of them meeting—especially since she could not, of course, attend church . . . not if she hoped to avoid another lecture from the Reverend Marshall and his wife. Thanks to Lord Glendenning, they were well aware that not only was she living alone and chaperoneless at Burn Cottage, but that she was there without her family's knowledge—that she had, in fact, been lying to everyone in her family for months now. Reverend Marshall was just the sort of man to write to her parents and explain what, precisely, Brenna was up to. . . .

Which was why the ten shillings she paid Stuben to hold all of the minister's outgoing mail and show it to her before transporting it to Lochalsh had proved such a worthy investment: she found and extracted the offensive missive, then burned it ceremoniously upon her hearth. The Reverend might

wonder at his not receiving a reply but would doubtless be too insulted by the slight to write again.

If only her problem with Reilly Stanton could be so easily resolved. For as sternly as she told herself not to think of him, she was often horrified to find her mind wandering back to that kiss they had shared. It was difficult, in fact, to keep the young doctor from creeping into her thoughts at all times. Often, as she pored over her work, she found herself thinking not of the task at hand, but of Reilly Stanton's eyes, or worse, his hands. . . .

The same hands over which she was bent now, carefully applying a dressing. The wound in his knuckles was deep and, she imagined, quite painful. He would not be doing any sort of complicated surgery for some time with this injury.

Which was a shame. Because Reilly Stanton, she was convinced, was the most highly skilled surgeon she had ever seen.

But since he was also the most compassionate man she knew—with the possible exception of her father—she had known the moment she'd heard from Mrs. Murphy of Shannon's visit to the dispensary precisely what she'd find at the Mackafees. . . .

Which was precisely what she did find: Shannon Mackafee clutching a solid gold guinea, more money than her family was likely to see together at one time in a decade; Harold Mackafee, sprawled upon the ground; and Reilly Stanton with a set of badly bleeding knuckles.

"You ought to let me stitch this," she said, as she bent over the raw-looking wound.

"Ye gods, no," Reilly Stanton said, cheerfully. "And mar my otherwise flawless skin with an unsightly scar?"

Brenna frowned. "It will be an even bigger scar if you leave it the way it is."

"No, thank you," he said. "I have nothing but respect for you insofar as your medical skills are concerned, but as for those pertaining to your domestic talents . . ." He raised his eyebrows suggestively. "Well, let's just say I'd rather run the risk of infection by leaving it open."

Brenna scowled. "What do you mean? You saw me stitch up Lucais. You even complimented me on it."

"Ah, but Lucais, madam, is a dog. Remember?"

She continued to frown. What was wrong with her? She didn't want to stitch up his stupid hand, anyway. The sooner she got away from him, the happier she would be.

So why couldn't she let the matter drop?

"And what's wrong with my domestic talents?" she wanted to know. "I keep the cottage very well,

I think.”

He looked about the room from where he sat at the rough-hewn, but undeniably spotless, table. There was a fire on the hearth, where a pot of water for tea was steadily warming. The rain that slanted against the diamond-paned windows made a pleasant sound that emphasized the cottage’s snug warmth.

“I suppose,” he said, noncommittally. “But then I’ve only just become aware of the nature of the strange rustling I’ve heard every time I’ve been here.” He looked up at the rafters overhead.

Brenna followed his gaze. “Oh, but that’s only Jo,” she said, and then broke off, realizing how ridiculous she must sound.

But not soon enough, since Reilly was on her reply at once. “Precisely. *Only Jo*. I inform you that there’s a bird flying loose in your rafters, and you respond with ‘*That’s only Jo*.’ ”

She made a face, then lifted the bowl of soapy water that she’d used to clean his wound and got up from the table, heading toward the basin.

“She’s one of my brother’s pets,” she explained . . . though why she bothered, she hardly knew. “He gave her to Hamish—you know, when we all left for London—but she wouldn’t stay, Hamish said. And then when I came back . . . well, she’s a creature of habit, evidently.”

“Unsanitary,” Reilly Stanton said. “Highly unsanitary.”

She could not tell whether he was joking or serious. On the whole, she thought it was almost always safe to assume Reilly Stanton was joking. That was one of the things, unfortunately, that she found so hard to resist about him.

But resist him she would.

She plunged the bowl into the icy water at the bottom of the sink.

“She’s house trained,” Brenna said. “Which is more than can be said for some of the people here in Lyning. So there’s nothing unsanitary about it.”

“How many brothers do you have?” was Reilly Stanton’s next unexpected question.

“Four,” she replied, suspiciously. And why shouldn’t she be suspicious? Since following her from the Mackafees, Reilly had not laid so much as a finger on her, much less brought up the subject that was very much on her mind . . . what had happened the last time the two of them had been in a room alone together.

Possibly, she thought to herself, that kiss had not meant to him what it had to her. After all, how many kisses had she had in her life? Only a few, courtesy of Lord Glendenning, and none of them

welcome. Reilly Stanton had been engaged: he had probably kissed dozens of girls—or at least one girl, dozens of times. The kiss they'd shared in Lord Glendenning's ballroom mightn't have been at all extraordinary to him.

But she found, even as she was thinking that, that she couldn't believe it. She had seen his face when she'd pushed him away from her. There had been longing—real longing—in his eyes, right alongside the naked lust.

“Four brothers,” Reilly Stanton said, from where he lounged at the table behind her. “All younger, I take it?”

She nodded, her attention on the soapy water before her. “The eldest is seventeen. The youngest seven.”

“The seventeen-year-old should have gone to school,” Reilly observed, “not India.”

She shrugged. “He wanted to go.”

“Harumph,” was all Reilly Stanton had to say to that.

“It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Brenna said, prickling.

He noticed. “Put your dander down. I'm not maligning your precious parents. My God, you're defensive about them. Now, then, what are we going to do?”

She set the well-rinsed bowl upon the drying rack. “About my brothers?” She flung a puzzled look at him from over her shoulder. “What is there to do? They'll be back in a year or two. Robbie can go to school then.”

Reilly rolled his expressive dark eyes.

“Not about your beloved brothers, Brenna. I mean about you and me.”

“Oh.” Her heart began to rattle so hard inside her chest, she had to reach out and grasp the edge of the sink for support. She hoped he didn't notice her shaking fingers.

Or her shaking voice as she said, “I don't suppose there's anything much we can do. Except . . . well, stay away from each other.”

This inspired another *harumph*, and what sounded like a disgusted shifting in his chair. Her back was turned resolutely to him, so she didn't know for certain what he did.

“Why should we?” he demanded. “Stay away from each other, I mean. I don't see the point in it.”

She looked down at her hands. They were not the fine hands of a lady. They were shaped well, she supposed, but her nails were broken in many places, and her skin chapped from having been plunged

too often in cold water.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, pleased that she’d managed to get her voice under control at last. “You said yourself, you’re as good as engaged.”

“*Was*,” Reilly corrected her. “I *was* engaged. I’m not engaged anymore.”

Brenna shook her head. “You had your heart broken. You’re looking to ease it a little. Well, I won’t be the one who—”

“For God’s sake, Brenna,” Reilly interrupted. “Listen to yourself. No, I’ve a better idea. Listen to me, for one minute. The fact of the matter is I like you—quite a bit, actually, when you aren’t being asinine, like you are now—and I rather fancy that you like me. At least you like me better than you like Glendenning, who’s my only competition, so far as I can see. I frankly don’t know why I shouldn’t be allowed to throw my hat into the ring. I mean, it isn’t as if we don’t have anything in common, you and me. I’m a physician, you’re a physician’s daughter. We’d both, I think, like to see an end to world plagues and the unsafe use of wolf traps . . . you know, that sort of thing. It just doesn’t seem like it would be such an out-and-out tragedy—you and me, I mean.”

“But it would.” She spun around to face him, hoping he would not be able to detect how wildly her heart was beating through the wool of her sweater. She had not, when he’d started speaking, quite believed her ears. He liked her . . . liked her quite a bit, he’d said. Never mind that part about her being asinine. He liked her!

But what, she’d asked herself, a second later, did *that* signify? It changed nothing. He was still a Londoner—one could tell that just by looking at him—who would go back there just as soon as he was able. He would, of course, deny it if she put it to him, but Lowlanders always returned to their easy lives in the south. And even if he asked her to, she could never go with him. She still had a job to do—an important one. She couldn’t afford any distractions.

Nor could she afford the kind of talk such a thing—her being courted by the new young doctor—would generate. For, though Reilly Stanton had been on the island for more than four months already, he was still considered a newcomer, by Skye standards.

She tried to explain it, even though it was difficult to hear herself speak above the roar in her ears. He liked her! *He liked her!*

“I am in a difficult situation as it is,” she said, “living out here by myself. The only reason I get away with it is that these people have known me all my life, and . . . well, to a certain extent, they depend on me. I’m not a woman to them, so much as I’m Miss Brenna, Dr. Donnegal’s daughter. But believe me, if I start entertaining suitors, people are going to begin to talk.”

He was sitting with one foot on the chair beside him, and the other on the floor. Now he placed both on the floor and leaned forward with his elbows on the table.

“Brenna,” he said slowly and evenly. “That is why I suggested to you, sometime ago, if you will recall, that you need to get a widow or someone in here to—”

“But I can’t do that,” she interrupted. “I can’t have a Mrs. Murphy or a Mrs. Marshall in here, poking around. I have my research—”

He threw both of his hands in the air and fell back in his chair disgustedly. “Oh, here we go again,” he said.

“Reilly,” she said, a desperate note in her voice. “Listen to me. You don’t know these people. You think you do, but you don’t. You can’t, not unless you’ve been through what they’ve been through. Last year’s wave of cholera hit this island like a wind from afar and took a third of the population away with it. You can’t understand how superstitious and frightened of this disease the people here have become. Cholera isn’t like scarletina. It isn’t a disease any of them have ever experienced before. Why do you think I have to go to the graveyard in the middle of the night to take down the names of the dead for my charts? Why do you think I take my soil samples at night, when everyone is asleep? No one wants to be reminded of it. Everyone wants to think it’s gone. But it isn’t gone, Reilly. As soon as it’s warm enough, it will be back, and when it comes back, I want to be ready for it—”

The chair legs scraped against the wood floor as he stood up.

“Fine,” he said, tersely. “I see.”

She set her jaw. She could read disappointment in his expression, but there was something else there, as well. Something that she suspected was anger. Seeing it—seeing that he still didn’t understand—she sighed.

“You said something to me today,” she reminded him, “about how what you’d done to Harold Mackafee was something a woman couldn’t understand. Well, here’s something that I think you, as a man, can’t understand. And that’s that there are women in this world who might—just might—have something more to contribute to humanity than a few more mouths to feed. Has that ever occurred to you?”

He only raised his eyebrows at her, looking faintly surprised.

“If I were a man,” Brenna went on, feeling close to tears, and not at all certain why, “and I said to you that my research was more important to me than . . . than being courted, or starting a family, you would admire me. People would say, ‘Oh, he’s so dedicated. His efforts toward the eradication of this disease are tireless.’ If I were a man—”

“Oh, posh,” Reilly said. “If you were a man, I wouldn’t be in love with you, so this line of talk is quite pointless, if you ask me.”

And then, to her complete and utter disbelief, he crossed the room in three quick strides, seized her by the shoulders, and pulled her roughly against him. Before she knew quite what was happening, his

lips had come down over hers, and he was kissing her again, like no time at all had gone by, and they were back in Lord Glendenning's ballroom again.

Certainly she was as nonplused as she'd been that night, completely taken aback by both the kiss and the casual way he'd announced his love for her. He didn't just like her. He was *in love* with her.

And somehow, the nonchalant manner in which he'd informed her of this fact had far more impact than any of Lord Glendenning's impassioned protestations. He was in love with her. Reilly Stanton was in love with her. He was kissing her, kissing her as if he hadn't any intention of stopping, and her in her trousers with her hair curling wildly because it had gotten so wet in the rain, and her hands chapped from the cold dishwater. . . .

"Dammit," Reilly said, suddenly lifting his head. "But what *is* that caterwauling?"

Blinking dreamily, Brenna listened . . . but all she could hear were his words, repeating over and over in her head. *I'm in love with you. I'm in love with you. I'm in love with—*

"Oh," she said, abruptly. "I hear it, too."

And she did. Above the rat-tat-tat of the rain hitting her windowpanes and the steady rhythm of the burn was another sound, a high-pitched voice, calling . . .

Calling her name.

"Hamish." She wrenched herself out from beneath Reilly Stanton's hands, and darted toward her macintosh, which hung dripping from a hook on the back of the cottage's front door. "That's Hamish."

"Hamish?" Reilly looked as dazed as she felt. He shook his head, like a dog shaking water from its ears. "What the devil is Hamish doing out in weather like this? I told that boy—"

But Brenna didn't hear the rest. She'd wrenched the door open and torn outside. The rain, which had not slackened since it had started to fall over two hours earlier, still came down, steady and hard. It, along with the melting snow rushing from the craggy mountains, had turned the burn from a pleasant stream to a burgeoning river, with a current that flowed strongly enough to knock any newborn lamb that ventured near its banks right off its unsteady little legs.

Which was exactly what had happened. Through the pelting rain, she was able to distinguish Hamish, running along the banks of the burn and trying vainly to snag a small, struggling creature from the raging waters with his shepherd's crook. All the while, he was hoarsely calling her name.

"Lord help us," Brenna breathed, as she took in the sight. Hamish had promised faithfully that, in light of his injury, he would sit quietly at home for the next few weeks . . . a promise that, lured by love for his flock, he had evidently been perfectly incapable of keeping.

"Hold on," Brenna shouted to the boy, as she ran out into the rain. "I'm coming!"

But though her concern for helping Hamish and rescuing the helpless creature was strong, she was still not entirely insensible of what had just happened. *He loves me*, she thought, as she raced toward the footbridge. *Good God in heaven, he loves me.*

Because the fact was—she could admit it to herself now—she had, since the night she'd watched him perform the trephine upon Hamish, been thoroughly infatuated with Reilly Stanton. And then, when he'd kissed her . . . well, infatuation had blossomed into adoration. It had been all she could do to keep herself from blurting out to him exactly how she felt.

Two things had held her back: the first was her conviction that a man of the world, such as Reilly Stanton was, could not possibly feel the same way toward her that she felt for him. After all, she was, to him, only the daughter of the village's previous physician, a curiosity in trousers and boots who had a passing knowledge of a few medical tricks, and who'd had the misfortune to attract the attention of the local earl.

That he could ever possibly love her . . . no. That she had never dared, even in her wildest dreams, to hope.

But now that she knew . . . well, her joy was tempered by her second concern: the knowledge that he would never stay on Skye. Even if the unbelievable happened—as, incredibly, it had—and Reilly Stanton did turn out to love her, he would not stay on Skye.

And she could never leave it.

“Brenna.”

Panting, Reilly joined her on the footbridge. He was tugging on his cloak, his hat and medical bag still inside the cottage.

“Really,” he said, when he'd come close enough for them to converse without having to shout at one another. “But I can't see how I'm ever to get a moment alone with you. You seem to be constantly in demand.”

Then, noting that Hamish had come hurrying up to them, he directed his attention to his former patient.

“I thought I told you to stick close to home for the next few weeks, young man,” Reilly admonished the boy, with a severity that wasn't quite joking.

“I know,” Hamish admitted, breathlessly. “But someone's got to look after the lambs. And look at what a mess we're in—Lucais went in after 'er, and now he's been swept away, too. Look!”

The little boy, who appeared smaller and more fragile than ever with his shaved head covered by an oversize cap, pointed.

Brenna, leaning against the footbridge's railing, scanned the cascading waters. Then she saw it, fast approaching them, tumbled by the rocks. A tiny, battered gray body, struggling frantically to keep its head above water. Then, behind it, a flash of black and white, tumbling toward them as quickly as a feather in the wind.

Lucais.

"Oh, God," Brenna breathed.

"He leaped in after the lamb," Hamish wailed.

"And got his feet knocked out from under him by the current." Reilly was already moving from the footbridge, removing the cloak he'd only just thrown on. "Never fear. I'll get him."

"You get Lucais," Hamish said, trotting behind the young doctor. "I'll get the lamb."

And the boy actually began peeling off his coat—

"No!" Brenna shouted, darting after him. "Not you, Hamish. You stay on shore."

Hamish looked up at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"But he can't get the dog and the lamb," the boy explained, as patiently as if he were speaking to a halfwit. "He don't got enough arms."

Brenna, already at the water's edge, began to climb down the bank. "I'll get the lamb," she shouted at Reilly, above the roar of the water. "You get Lucais."

Reilly, already thigh deep in the water, shouted back at her not to be stupid. Actually, a pigheaded nincompoop was what he called her, in distinctly unloverlike tones. But it was too late. She had stepped into the biting-cold burn and was attempting to intercept the lamb as it came hurtling toward her.

Conscious as it was of its danger, and far too exhausted from its efforts to keep its head above water to fight the current, the lamb nevertheless wasn't at all happy at Brenna's attempt to rescue it. The stupid creature attempted to leap away from her, as much as it could in the icy water, and only succeeded in being sucked under momentarily. Brenna, panicked the tiny body would slip right between her legs and be bashed up across the footbridge, plunged both her arms and most of her upper body beneath the surface of the water, frantically feeling for the woolly body.

She caught it, but only just. A second later, she straightened, the lamb fighting—albeit feebly—in her arms.

"Got it," she called to Reilly, who had, she soon saw, problems of his own. Lucais was as frightened as the lamb had been—but also outweighed the tiny creature Brenna held in her arms by a

good fifty or sixty pounds. The dog—perhaps because it did not know him very well, or perhaps simply because it was numb with cold and exhaustion—fought Reilly, trying frantically to make it to the banks on its own, until finally, after fighting its way out of Reilly’s grip and being sucked under two or three times, simply gave up and floated limply on the water’s surface, its gaze glassy. . . .

Until Reilly whipped around and seized the animal by its tail, just as it was about to collide with one of the wooden supports that held the footbridge aloft.

The animal did lift his head then, and look back at Reilly as if to say, *Why bother?* But some of his spirits seemed to return, since this time, when Reilly seized him, Lucais did not fight him—in fact, the dog even paddled his feet feebly as Reilly moved exhaustively toward shore. . . .

Where he collapsed in an exhausted heap, the dog in his lap, and Hamish dancing joyfully all around him.

“You,” Reilly said to Brenna, when he had caught his breath, “had better have some whisky in that house of yours.”



She did have whisky in the house. Plenty of it, actually.

She slammed the bottle down in front of him—

Then she darted from the room, muttering about finding something dry to put on.

Well, never mind that, he thought, as he lifted the bottle to his lips with fingers that, he noticed, with clinical interest, shook from the cold. Manners were of somewhat short supply on Skye. Even Hamish—for whom they'd risked their necks saving both his blasted dog and that infernally stupid lamb—hadn't properly thanked them for it. No, he'd only wrestled the lamb away from Brenna, then thrust it—still dripping wet—beneath his shirt, to keep it warm. Then he'd whistled to Lucais, who, after a moment's rest, shook himself and stood up, and took off. Brenna's admonishments that he come inside the cottage to dry off a little and have a cup of tea to warm him up, fell on deaf ears. Boy, dog, and lamb took off at no mean speed.

Most likely, Reilly knew, Hamish's rapid exit had been in an effort to escape a scolding from him for coming out in such inclement weather with his wound not yet completely healed, something Reilly had forbade him, quite sternly, from attempting.

But not even to have paused long enough for a thank-you?

Well, that seemed to be the Lyming way. Perhaps Hamish had thought his thanks implicit. Though what Brenna could be thinking, leaving Reilly to stand, dripping by the fire, with not even the offer of a towel, while she disappeared into her room to change . . . well, there was nothing implicit in *that*.

Well, no matter. There would be plenty of time to train her in the art of gracious hostessing after they were married.

For they would, he decided, have to marry. He was not certain when this resolution had formed itself in his head, but it appeared to have happened somewhere around the time he had seen Brenna Donnegal wade fearlessly—and without complaint—into the icy waters of the burn, all in the hopes of rescuing an already half-drowned lamb. He had never seen any woman risk her own safety and comfort in such a manner. It was quite beyond his realm of comprehension. His mother, his sisters—even Christine, who'd often professed her love for all of God's creatures—would never have done such a thing. Brenna Donnegal was clearly a woman the likes of whom he would never again

encounter, and he would do, he decided, whatever he had to in order to see that she did not slip away.

How he was going to broach the subject of matrimony to Brenna, however, remained a bit murky. She was evidently against the idea of anything that might impede her scientific pursuits. He had a feeling from the speech she'd been making just before he'd kissed her that marriage fell under the category of Impediment.

He would have to see what he could do to dissuade her of this nonsensical notion.

A second later, she came hurtling out of one of the rooms she'd disappeared into and thrust some clothing at him.

"Here," she said. She had not, he noticed, changed from her own sodden ensemble. "These are my father's. They should fit you. You look about the same size, I think."

Eyebrows raised, Reilly examined the clothing she'd flung at him. Ungracious hostess indeed! Why, his comfort had been foremost in her concerns all along! First the whisky, and now this.

"Thank you," he started to say, but she was gone again, back into her own room, where she would, he hoped, put on something a bit more feminine than the trousers . . . which he dearly admired, but which would, he felt, not be the sort of attire he'd like to describe to their children as the sort of thing Mamma was wearing when Papa proposed.

Reilly inspected the things she'd brought him. Her father, for a physician, apparently kept himself in a state of not-unfashionable dress. The breeches were of closely-woven wool, and a fine forest green. The shirt was of a handsome linen, and the waistcoat expensively tailored. Nice items, for a country physician.

With an effort, he climbed to his feet, and began to pry off first his soaking boots, and then his drenched trousers, reflecting as he did so that since coming to this odd, often tedious, but sometimes excessively diverting place, he had received any number of ignominious dunkings, from his first, off Stuben's ferry, to this one. He sincerely hoped that the drowning victims he'd saved this time would go on to lead slightly more profitable lives than Stuben, who still wended his way through life in an alcoholic haze. In the case of Lucais, it was a given that this would be the case: never had there been a harder-working, happier dog than Lucais.

But as for the lamb, well, Reilly felt he had cause for concern. He would, he felt, have to purchase this lamb from the MacGregors, since, after seeing his beloved—and no matter what she said, he would call his Brenna his beloved—go to such lengths to save it, he would not allow the little thing to become anyone's Easter supper.

As he changed, he glanced out the window. The sky outside those diamond-shaped panes was growing dark, and not just because of the rain, which continued to fall nonstop. Dusk was upon them. He would just be shutting up the dispensary doors, if he had not been on a call, and wondering what Mrs. Murphy was preparing for supper. He hoped Brenna had something just as appetizing, though he

did not suppose she did. It was rather too much to hope that a woman with a scientific bent might possess culinary talents as well.

And then she came banging out of her room, wearing a dress he had never seen her in before, a narrow-fitting, dark blue velvety thing, with buttons—unfortunately every one of them fastened—all the way up to her neck. She had twisted her damp hair into some sort of knot on top of her head and pinned it there with something that occasionally caught the firelight and sparkled. The effect gave him a little hint as to how she was going to look in the Stillworth diamonds. The tiara, he decided, just might suit after all.

She had changed far more quickly than he had. He was only just dragging his wet shirt from over his head. . . .

Which was how she saw the memento Lucais had left him.

“Oh my God!” Brenna’s hand flew to her mouth. “What happened to you?”

Reilly, throwing the shirt away, glanced down at the claw marks across his chest.

“Lucais,” he said, with a shrug. “Quite annoyingly reluctant to be rescued, he was.”

“Oh, God.” She hurried toward him, but not, he thought with some annoyance, because the sight of his naked chest filled her with any sort of lustful longings. No, she hurried toward him because she wanted to clean his wounds.

Pitiful. That’s what his existence was. Just plain pitiful.

“Here,” she was saying, levering a damp piece of cotton wool at him. “Let me see those.”

“Good Lord,” he said, thoroughly demoralized. “It’s nothing, all right?”

She made a face to show him what she thought of his embarrassment.

“I’ve seen you shirtless before,” she reminded him. “The first time we ever met, for that matter. So stop being so stupid. Those wounds *aren’t* nothing. Sit down.”

“Brenna—”

“Sit *down*.”

And standing before him, she pushed on his naked shoulders. He found himself sinking down onto the well-scrubbed tabletop, not so much because she forced him to—she was a big girl, but not *that* big—but because the touch of her fingers against his bare skin left him feeling a little weak at the knees.

“That’s better,” she said, and moved to dab the wool she held against the scratches on his chest. To

get close enough to do this, she had to stand between his legs.

This, Reilly felt, his spirits lifting, was rather encouraging, and he couldn't help uttering a silent prayer of thanks that of all the dogs in the world that could have fallen into the burn that day, it had been one without enough sense to know when it was being rescued. The cuts that had horrified Brenna so were mere surface scratches, deep enough to bleed a bit, but not hurt. If they happened to look worse than they were, well, so much the better for luring this delectable and far too clinically-minded woman into his reach.

"Does this sting very much?" Brenna asked anxiously, as she dabbed.

"Very much," Reilly replied, noting that Brenna's coal-black eyelashes, curled across her high cheekbones as she bent over her work, were long and tilted up nicely at the ends. It was too bad her dress was buttoned up so high, because looking down at her as he was, he could have enjoyed a splendid view.

"I'm sorry," Brenna was saying. She threw away the bloodied piece of cotton wool she'd been using, and reached for another. Since the pile was on the table, to reach for it she had to lean across him, and one of those breasts he'd been admiring, despite its being hidden in all that blue velvet, pressed softly against his arm. "I ought to have suspected Lucais would panic, not knowing you well. He's a friendly dog, generally, but when he's frightened . . ."

"Oh," Reilly said, looking down at the nape of her neck as she continued to dab at the cuts on his chest. "Think nothing of it." She had, he noticed, a very long and slender neck, the skin of which was quite pale. Loose tendrils of red hair curled against her nape. Perhaps it was his already heightened sense of arousal—he did have a woman between his legs, after all, and he was quite shirtless—but there seemed something highly provocative about the sight of those curls, so fine and soft, against that very pale skin. Something that made him long to press his lips there.

And why shouldn't he? They were, after all, alone. Night was falling, as was the rain, but they were both snug and dry now in this fine cottage. *His* cottage, technically, if one thought about it.

And she had never objected very much before when he'd kissed her. At least, she'd objected, but he hadn't ever felt she'd really meant it. Well, maybe that bit about wanting to concentrate her efforts on proving this ridiculous theory of her father's. She'd clearly meant *that*.

But his kisses? He didn't think she found them so repulsive. Not if the way she kissed him back was any indication.

And so he leaned forward, and with an air of concentration, placed his lips against the back of her neck, where the hair had been brushed up to reveal that warm and pale column.

She reacted as violently as it he had pinched her. She jerked her head up, narrowly avoiding colliding her skull with his chin, and, smacking a hand to the back of her neck, as if to kill a mosquito, stared at him with wide and accusing eyes.

“Don’t,” she said, in an indignant voice. “Really, we mustn’t. I thought I’d—”

But it was simply too much to resist. Her being there, that is, so warm and close, and smelling faintly of that scent she’d worn that night at Lord Glendenning’s evening party. And then there was the fire burning so merrily, and the rain making such a pleasant clatter against the windowpanes. What could he do but reach out and wrap his arms around her narrow waist?

And how was he supposed to keep himself from pulling her slowly toward him, until her legs were pressed against that part of him that had gone all pleasantly tight and hard at the same time?

And when he felt her hands spread—even if it was in an attempt to push him away—against the bare flesh of his chest, well, why shouldn’t he lower his mouth over hers? And then when their tongues met, and those fingers went from pushing to pulling, as if she could not fill her hands with enough of him, well, why shouldn’t he have felt a little internal spurt of triumph, and think, *She’s mine now*.

Because, after all, she was.

And she knew it. She’d known it from the minute she’d seen him standing there in the firelight with his shirt off—exactly the way she’d seen him that very first night at The Tortured Hare. Brenna had accompanied her father on many a house call, and seen more than her fair share of naked chests, but never had she seen one like Reilly Stanton’s. Tightly muscled, and covered with only the narrowest strip of dark hair—which started from below the waistband of his breeches, then widened gradually until it swirled around a pair of flat, cocoa brown nipples—the sight of it stopped Brenna dead in her tracks, just as it had that first time . . . though then, she’d taken care not to show her admiration. She had not even noticed the bloodied claw marks until he’d turned a little toward her, and the firelight had brought them out in high relief.

Still, she had resolutely put her attraction to him aside, concentrating instead upon cleaning his wounds. And how difficult had that been, standing there between his legs, trying not to be aware of the great heat that was emanating from him, as she dabbed at the long, but admittedly shallow, cuts in his skin?

And smelling him! Why, he still smelled of Mrs. Murphy’s soap, a clean, fresh odor, in spite of the fact that he’d been out in the rain and wind all day. It was exceedingly difficult to ignore his clean-soap smell while she worked upon the cuts Lucais’s claws had caused. As she bent so close to him, she could not help noticing the even rhythm with which his furred chest rose and fell. Or the swell of the muscles that made up his biceps . . . at rest now, but when flexed, she knew, quite intimidating.

And how could she help but notice his soft breath on the back of her neck? Every inch of her, it seemed, had been tingling before he’d even laid a hand on her.

And why shouldn’t she tingle? This was the man who had told her, barely half an hour before, that he was in love with her. In love with her! Her, Brenna Donnegan, surely the strangest girl in all of

England. This man, this incredibly beautiful, perfect specimen of a man, was in love with her.

And what was she doing about it?

Nothing. What *could* she do? She had a mission, and she could not—would not—allow anything to defer her from it.

Only . . .

Well, just look at those *shoulders*. So wide. So strong. So perfect a place for a girl to rest her head.

And then he'd kissed her—just the lightest of kisses, and on no more erotic spot than the back of her neck. But it had been as if a bolt of lightning had run down her spine. She had straightened like a puppet on the end of a string, every nerve in her body singed from the shock of it.

When he'd pulled her toward him after that, she'd wanted to protest. Honestly, she had.

But it was almost as if with that single kiss, he'd managed to turn not only her spine, but her will, to aspic. He reeled her in as expertly as ever Adam MacAdams had reeled in his daily catch. She'd tried to push away, but her fingers had come into contact with bare skin—the bare skin of his chest, which she'd been longing to touch, she realized, from that first moment she'd met him—and suddenly, all the fight went out of her and all she could think, as his lips descended over hers, was that his fiancée had to have been crazy, letting go of a man like this. . . .

Nectar. That's what she tasted of to Reilly. He had never actually eaten nectar before—it sounded rather like treacle, which he despised—but he'd certainly had enough works of the Romantic poets thrust upon him to know that nectar was supposedly this very delicious thing.

And that's what Brenna Donnegal tasted like. Something very delicious. Something he thought he'd like a good deal more of. So much more of, in fact, that he didn't think he'd be able simply to kiss her for much longer. He wanted more than just kissing. . . .

And this time, there'd be no interruptions. The rain was pouring steadily now—no tepid drizzle this—and night had fallen. The lambing season was over, and there were no expectant barmaids that he knew of who might conceivably go into labor just then. If any more sheep fell into the burn, well, no one would be able to see to fish them out anyway, it was so dark out. It was just Reilly and Brenna, and he fully intended to make the most of this rare occasion.

So he obeyed the impulse that had occurred to him the moment he'd first seen her come out of her bedroom, which was to get Brenna Donnegal as naked as he was . . . preferably more so.

An impulse he followed up on by applying his fingers to the many buttons at her neck.

She did not appear at first to notice what his nimble and thoroughly determined fingers were about.

Which was precisely how he wanted it. Keep her busy kissing—a task she did extraordinarily well—and his goal would be accomplished that much faster.

Kissing Brenna Donnegal was easy. Undressing her, he soon found, was not. Really, of all the dresses he supposed she had, why had she settled on *this* particular one for *this* particular night. . . .

“Reilly,” she murmured, against his lips, when his fingers—surgeon’s fingers, that could handle a scalpel with aplomb—bungled an attempt at the sixth or seventh button (only a dozen or so more to go).

“Shhh,” he said, and kissed her even more deeply.

There. The wretched thing was undone. Onto the next one, this one thankfully between her breasts, so if she happened to object, he could merely slide his fingers over and quiet her that way. He knew from what had passed between them in Glendenning’s ballroom how easily aroused she was. . . .

Something Brenna was aware of, as well. All too aware, now that he was kissing her, and his fingers—oh, those dexterous fingers!—were doing things she knew they shouldn’t. Undressing her, it seemed like. And Brenna didn’t want to be undressed. Not if that meant feeling all of the enormous heat that radiated from Reilly Stanton’s naked skin against her own. She would, she was convinced, disappear in a cloud of smoke. Just a puff and she’d be gone, like kindling placed in front of an inferno.

Oh, what was she doing, what was she *doing*, letting him kiss her like this? It was wrong. It had to be wrong. Reilly Stanton’s kisses drove from her head every other thought save those of . . . well, Reilly Stanton. And that couldn’t be good. Could it?

Like those fingers she now felt grazing the sides of her breasts. They had no business being there, did they? Only just as she was about to protest against them, they did something she was certain wasn’t fair. They dipped inside her gown and brushed once and then twice against the creamy skin of her chest. That couldn’t be right, could it?

But then when—miraculously, it seemed to her—yet another button of her gown gave way, revealing both of her breasts to the glow of the fire and Reilly Stanton’s questing hands, it felt nothing *but* right. It was as if his palms had been made to fit against her nipples, his fingers carved for the express purpose of lifting and then caressing each of her breasts. She knew she oughtn’t let him touch her like this, but it felt so good, why should she make him stop? Especially when, through her passion-soaked haze, she heard him make a noise in his throat, an appreciative sound that told her far more than his worshipful touch how very much he’d been longing to do exactly what he was doing right then.

And why shouldn’t she let him? Good God, the feel of his fingers on her bare flesh was enough to make her toes curl in her slippers. The hair on her head felt tingly and alive . . . and that was only her *hair*. The rest of her was reacting in ways that would have appalled the girls back at Miss Laver’s London Seminary for Young Ladies. Her ear lobes had that heavy, draggy feeling again, and her

breasts . . . oh, her breasts had been craving his touch long before he'd ever laid hands on them!

But that wasn't all. There had been a distinct tightening in the area between her legs, a tightening which, she noticed, with both interest and the clinical detachment of a true scientist, seemed to be directly correlated to Reilly Stanton's kisses and where he put his hands. This tightness, with every exploratory caress he made, seemed to increase, and left, in its varying degrees of intensity, a wake of slick moisture that seemed to be centered in the gusset of her drawers.

It was this area of Brenna's body that seemed to be yearning most for Reilly Stanton's touch. And Brenna, although technically a virgin, was by no means ignorant of just which corresponding body part of Reilly's that particular area of hers was yearning for. She could feel that body part pressing with no insignificant amount of urgency against her abdomen, straight through the material of her gown and the wool of his breeches.

She ought, she supposed, to have been frightened. It was a situation, after all, in which she lacked any sort of personal experience from which she might have drawn a reasoned conclusion. But she had a scientist's thirst for knowledge that far surpassed any trepidation she might have been feeling—plus an overwhelming longing for the feel of Reilly's naked body against her own that quite exceeded all other compunction.

And so she did what seemed the natural thing—the thing they both clearly wanted—and laid her hand upon that stiff and burgeoning part of him, through the material of his trousers.

This was apparently quite the correct way to have proceeded, since Reilly let out an exceptionally gratified moan, tore his lips from hers, and dragging them, wet and hot, down her throat, placed them over one of her pale nipples.

Brenna, in an effort to show how much she appreciated this generosity, responded with a gesture of her own, one in which she undid the buttons down the front of his breeches and reached inside them to wrap a hand around that piece of him she could feel straining so hard to get closer to her.

She was quite surprised by both its length and thickness—not to mention the heat the thing gave off—and was beginning to suffer from a very unscientific fit of nerves over the rather daunting prospect that apparently lay ahead, when Reilly, quite thoroughly taken aback by what she had done, but not in the least resenting it, suddenly stooped, wrapped an arm around her hips and slung her, much as he had that afternoon, over one shoulder, then began heading, without further ceremony, toward her bedroom door.

Perhaps it was the fact that his lips were no longer over hers. Perhaps it was the hotness of the skin along his back, against which her bare breasts were crushed. Perhaps it was the fact that the memory of what she'd held, for so brief a time, continued to linger menacingly. Whatever it was, she chose that moment to say, in a panicked voice which sounded choked from the fact that her head was upside down, "Reilly, I really don't think we ought to. Perhaps we should consider this for a moment. It can only lead to all sorts of complications, complications we neither of us need just at the moment—"

To which he replied by depositing her upon her own bed, and then, when she tried to get up again, pinning her body to it with his own.



“*I* mean it, Reilly,” Brenna said, with mounting anxiety.

That anxiety, however, proved wholly transient by fleeing the moment he pressed his mouth once more to hers. It probably helped that at the same moment, he again laid his hands over her breasts, as if he could not get enough of them.

Which, in fact, he couldn't.

“Reilly,” Brenna managed to blurt, when eventually he lifted his head to begin yet another assault with his lips upon her nipples. “Think about it. We both have . . . so much work . . . to do. . . .”

It was exceedingly difficult to speak, Brenna was discovering, when a man's lips were on one's breasts. And just what, she wondered dazedly, were his hands doing? They seemed to be tugging on the hem of her gown, pulling it steadily higher and higher, first past her ankles, and then her knees, and now the ruffled edges of her pantaloons were showing, and now her thighs, and now . . .

“You're right,” Reilly said, raising his face from between the valley of her breasts and eyeing her inscrutably. There was no fire in her room, just a single candle she'd left burning when she'd come in to change, and she could not see him very well.

She could feel him, however, only too well. Those criminally agile fingers had succeeded in pulling her skirt up to her waist, and now there was a hand hovering altogether too close to that part of her which had been longing most for his touch. This wouldn't do. This wouldn't do at all.

“We have a great deal,” Reilly went on, kissing her throat, “of work to do, you and I.”

“You know what kind of work I mean, Reilly,” she said, through gritted teeth. She had to grit her teeth in an effort not to do what she was craving to, which was thrust her pelvis into that hand he had lying so enticingly upon her thigh. “And it's not this. I mean my—”

But she never finished that sentence because Reilly moved his hand and brushed those extremely adept fingers with the lightest of touches against the gusset of her pantaloons, causing her to gasp and then catch her lower lip in her teeth. Oh, God! That such sensations even existed! And her at her charts and microscope, hardly knowing, all that time, what it meant to be alive. . . .

“Reilly,” she said, only this time her voice carried with the name a note of pleading.

“It’s all right,” he said, and in the dim light from the candle, she thought she saw a flash of teeth as he smiled. Well, and why not? Reilly Stanton was always smiling. “Really, it is, Brenna.”

And then he was kissing her again, only there was something different in his kissing this time. This was not like the quick hungry kisses from before. This kiss was languorous—still hotly intense, but with new purpose. Brenna discovered what that purpose was when, a minute later, the ribbon that held her pantaloons together was slyly undone, and before she was even aware of what was happening, one of Reilly Stanton’s hands was between her thighs, stroking the damp curls he found there.

Her heart drumming so hard in her chest she could hardly hear the rain hissing on the thatch above their heads, she closed her eyes. What else was she supposed to do? She couldn’t stop him. Didn’t want to anymore.

And then somehow, the pantaloons were gone, as was her gown, and she was naked. And so, when she glanced his way, was he. And when she looked closely—purely out of scientific curiosity—she was surprised to see that his skin was a shade or two darker than her own . . . even those places she was quite sure had never been exposed to the sun.

But he didn’t give her much of a chance for observation. No sooner had he thrown off her gown than he was pressing her back against the pillows of her bed—her bed that had known no other occupant than herself in all of its existence and would now be the scene, she was guiltily aware, of her defloration—his mouth assaulting hers with renewed vigor, his fingers drawn once again to that copper-colored triangle between her thighs.

Only this time, there was no exploration. His knowledgeable hands managed, with the lightest of touches, to cause her knees to melt apart.

And then he was between them, his naked body hot and hard everywhere it came into contact with hers, her thighs, her belly, her breasts, her arms, which she’d curled instinctively around his neck. He was kissing her intrusively, and in between kisses murmuring her name, and other things, too, one hand tangled in her hair, which had come undone from the comb she’d used to pin it and tumbled wildly across the pillows, while with his other hand, he seemed to be reaching for something. . . .

A split second later she felt him, solid and full, pressing up against her. And instead of being afraid, as she knew she ought to have been, she felt only that same overwhelming urge for him to touch her there. And so she tilted her hips just the tiniest bit . . . but that slight movement was evidently enough since, with a startled hiss in her ear, as if he had not meant it to happen quite like that, he was suddenly inside of her.

Why this, she thought to herself, isn’t so bad. What had all those girls at Miss Laver’s—the ones with married older sisters, anyway—been talking about when they’d gone on about how it hurt so badly the first time?

And then he moved, and she knew.

She knew because it turned out he hadn't even been halfway there yet, not even close, and it *did* hurt. It hurt enough so that she wondered what on earth Flora got out of it, except a lot of pain, and then even more pain to follow nine months later.

And she couldn't help crying out, and of course he instantly stopped because he didn't want to hurt her, which only made it worse, and tears filled up her eyes and she called him a bad word and tried to push him off, and he caught both of her hands and pressed them to the mattress and moved again, and this time she knew he was all the way inside of her, and she felt bitterly resentful over having been born a woman. . . .

For about a second. That was how long it took her to realize that it no longer hurt and that, in fact, it felt rather good.

“Are you all right now?”

Slowly, she became aware that Reilly lay frozen on top of her, barely even breathing, he was so afraid of having hurt her. Not that remaining still did not seem to be costing him a certain amount of effort. There was a sheen across his brow, in spite of the fact that it was actually quite chilly in the room, and that vein she'd noticed once before in the center of his forehead was throbbing rather hard. His hands were cutting off the circulation to her fingers, they were gripping her so tightly.

She took his question with clinical literalness. *Was* she all right? She'd felt broken before, but she was fairly certain it was physically impossible for a man to break a woman that way.

In order to be able to answer his question truthfully, she felt a certain amount of experimentation was necessary, and so she moved her hips—just the slightest bit—to see if the pain would return.

It did not. In fact, a rather glorious sensation ran through her as she moved up and down against the extremely rigid staff which still lay embedded deep within her.

A sensation he must have shared, since when she moved, he sucked in his breath again, and the vein in his forehead did some rather violent leaping.

“*Are you all right, Brenna?*” he asked again, this time through gritted teeth.

She said, “I conscientiously believe so,” and was fully prepared to discuss the matter further if he felt an urge to.

But the only urge he apparently felt was an urge to move that part of him that was so firmly implanted within her, and move it in a manner that wreaked all sorts of havoc with her presence of mind. Suddenly, her body arched against his, her arms tightening around his neck and her head falling back against the pillows in ecstatic lethargy. . . .

And he let go of her wrists, cupping her face in his hands instead, and raining kisses down upon her mouth as he moved again, and again, each time invoking in her the conviction that this was the loveliest sensation in the world . . . until he moved again, and her hips rose up to meet him, and she'd think, No, no, *this, this* is even better. . . .

And then he was plunging deeper and deeper, harder and harder into her, making the bed frame thump against the wall, and she didn't care. She welcomed each delicious thrust, each time he sighed her name in a hoarse voice that shook, each explosive beat of his heart, slamming against hers through his rib cage. . . .

Until suddenly every muscle in her body seemed to go taut, like a fishing wire some monstrously large creature had attached itself to, deep beneath the surface of her soul.

Only the creature, as it happened, was not some seventy-foot serpent, but a colossal wave of passionate pleasure, which crashed over her, tumbling her senses, breaking the wire, and showering her with surge after surge of carnal delight. She shivered with it, the soles of her feet, the ends of her hair, even the tips of her fingers seeming to glow with erotic bliss. . . .

Until the last flickering ripple ebbed away, leaving her damp, thoroughly satiated, and only dimly aware that collapsed across her lay another victim of this particularly delicious malady.

By the time Reilly raised his face from the curve of her neck, the candle on her dresser was guttering but had not quite gone out. So she was still able to read his expression, which was one of concern—albeit beatific concern.

“You're not going to hurl recriminations and accusations at me, are you?” he wanted to know.

“Because of what we just did, you mean?” She blinked at him sleepily. It couldn't be half seven, but she felt as lethargic as if it were midnight.

“Right. Because if you are,” he said, lifting a curl of her hair and examining it minutely in the candlelight, “I think you should know that I fully intend to marry you—that I've been wanting to marry you, I think, since the moment I first laid eyes on you, when you brought old Stuben back from the dead. In any case, near enough to it for it not to matter very much. I think you'll agree with me, just as soon as you've come to your senses, that it's the only reasonable course of action. Marriage, I mean.”

She stiffened. She couldn't help it. He felt it, and said before she was able to utter a sound, “Oh, for God's sake, Brenna. Don't try to pretend that you don't love me. I know you wouldn't have let that happen—what just happened—if you didn't.”

He was right, of course. She did love him—God help her, she did, though it was the last thing she wanted, let alone needed. That wasn't why she'd stiffened. She'd stiffened because the full reality of what she'd gotten herself into was finally sinking in.

She had made love. With Reilly Stanton. She had made love with Reilly Stanton. She, Brenna Donnegal, had lost her virginity to a man she had, up until about a month ago, thoroughly despised. Hadn't she?

What were her parents going to think?

Her parents? What was *Lord Glendenning* going to think? Good Lord, Reilly's employment lay in the balance, and all he could talk about was marriage. They could not, the two of them, remain on Skye as man and wife. Lord Glendenning would never stand for it. . . .

But she *had* to stay on Skye. Everything depended upon her staying on Skye. *Everything*.

Oh, she couldn't think straight. Not when he was still so close to her . . . Good Lord, he was still *inside* of her. What had she done? What had she *done*?

Reilly, carefully watching her face for signs of recrimination, saw what he took to be the first indicator of one when she grimaced. He steeled himself for what he was sure was to follow. Having never personally deflowered a virgin before, he was unaccustomed to the practice, but Shelley, who had an affinity for shop girls, had advised Reilly and Pearson both in the art. The virgin, Shelley had explained, generally did not enjoy the experience of shedding her maidenhead.

But even if she had enjoyed herself very much indeed, it was to be expected that afterward, there would be a good deal of guilt and tears. Even, Shelley added, prayer, generally to the Madonna, if the virgin in question happened to be a Catholic. It was a good idea, Shelley had assured his friends, always to carry a large clean handkerchief and a diamond bauble, both of which could be handed over at a moment's notice should applications to the Holy Mother be made.

Reilly had a handkerchief with him—although he supposed it was probably very wet—but no diamond bauble to speak of. But was it necessary to placate a virgin he fully intended to marry with jewelry? Shelley, having never married any of the virgins he'd debauched, had not mentioned the appropriate course of action in those particular circumstances.

And anyway, Reilly did not expect to be hearing any rosaries from Brenna Donnegal. If she believed in a divine maker, she certainly kept that conviction to herself. Besides, she wasn't the diamond bauble type. A more powerful microscope might be a more appropriate gift, under the circumstances. Or perhaps a trip to the new medical library in Paris. . . .

But her hesitation, he could see, had nothing to do with any sort of self-loathing over what they'd done. No, he could see that behind her deceptively drooping eyelids—feigning sleep—some swift mental calculations were taking place. Why, she was trying to figure out how to wriggle out of marrying him, so that she could stay on this blasted rock with all the wretched Mackafees and Floras and cure them of their next cholera epidemic. He could see it in her face!

Had there ever, he asked himself, been such a woman as this in all the history of time? Queen Boadicea, he supposed, really was the only one who came close. Possibly Queen Esther, as well.

God spare and protect him from these fascinating, but frighteningly single-minded, queens. How was it that he had managed to fall in love with one of them? What had happened to his affection for Christine? He had been quite fond of her once, if memory served.

But what was a Christine King to a Brenna Donnegan? The flame from a match head when compared to the flames bursting from an actively erupting volcano.

He felt, rather than heard, her stomach rumble beneath him.

“Hungry?” he asked, none of the frustration he felt with her showing on his face or in his voice . . . or so he hoped, anyway.

“I suppose so. . . .” she said faintly.

But she only spoke vaguely because she was clearly thinking about something else . . . something other than him. There wasn’t the slightest hint of tears in her eyes. She was not regretting what they had done . . . at least, not openly. Not yet.

He hardly knew if this meant he had won the battle or lost it.

“Well, then.” He rolled gently away from her. Her gaze lost its indirectness then, as cold rushed in to all the places where he had, seconds before, lain. There was a distinctive chill in the air in her little bedroom, with its frilled curtains on the windows and its utter lack of anything else remotely feminine . . . except, perhaps, its occupant.

For if there had ever, Reilly noted, been a lovelier, more feminine creature than Brenna Donnegan, sans apparel, he did not think it had ever been recorded, in either paint or stone. She was quite beyond any Titian or da Vinci creation. A classical beauty, long limbed and narrow waisted, but full at both the hip and breast. And such skin! Such skin as he had never seen—or felt—in his life. Ivory in color and smooth as butter. He could—and did—lose himself in such skin, and looked forward to doing it on a fairly regular basis.

That is, of course, if he could convince its owner of the merits of such a plan.

“Where are you going?” Brenna asked, looking concerned as she sat up, then reached for the blue and white counterpane folded at the end of her bed, under which, unfortunately, she hid all that glorious skin.

“To find us something for supper.” Reilly stepped back into the breeches he’d thrown onto the floor. “You do have food in the house, I suppose?”

She sat up. Her red curls spilled over her shoulders and into her face. She pushed some of them away.

“Of course I have food,” she said indignantly. “Here, let me—” And she reached for the dark blue

gown.

“No,” he said gallantly. “I’ll do it.”

“No,” she said. “You don’t know where anything is. I’ll do it.”

Good God. Was this how it was to be, then? Were they to battle over even the smallest incidentals, like who was to prepare the dinner salad?

Well, it would certainly be a lively, if rather exhausting, existence.

“Fine.” With a flick of his wrist, Reilly released the buttons holding up his breeches. They fell to a mound at his feet, which he stepped neatly out of. “You do it, then.”

And with a leap, he was back on the bed, his hands folded behind his head, his feet crossed at the ankles.

Since he was, however, completely naked, perhaps it wasn’t any great wonder that Brenna balked rather than going about her culinary duties, her eyes rather wide in her head and her gaze focused, he noticed, with some degree of satisfaction, on that part of him which had afforded them both so much pleasure earlier.

“Hullo,” he said. “Changed your mind, have you?”

Tearing her gaze guiltily away, she blushed. Brenna Donnegan actually blushed. He found the effect wholly charming.

“No,” she said quickly. “No, I’ll just . . . I’ll just go and . . .”

“Unless there’s something else you’d rather do, instead,” he offered equably.

“I—” She cleared her throat. The blush was still riding high in her cheeks. “Well, I—”

Immensely entertaining as it was, torturing her in such a manner, he hadn’t the heart for it. He swept out an arm and pulled her toward him. As she tumbled forward, the counterpane fell away, spilling all sorts of lovely things out across his chest.

“Perhaps,” he said, “you’d prefer to stay abed a bit longer. . . .”

“That,” she said, her voice muffled since her face was pressed up to his neck, “might be nice. . . .”

And, indeed, it was.



The MacAdamses. The Campbells. The Mackafees. The Abercrombies. The Murphys. The Marshalls.

She stared down at the names until they grew blurry before her eyes. There was a pattern there. She knew there was a pattern. But why couldn't she see it? She had been adding names to this map of Lyming for months, but she was no closer to an answer than she had been when she'd first started.

It had all seemed so clear to her back in London, where she'd first thought of it the evening after she'd watched her father booted out of a meeting of the Royal College of Physicians. A pattern. That was what her father had failed to find. A pattern that proved his theory that miasmas did not exist, that contagious diseases like cholera and enteric fever were caused by something else.

But what? If not by vaporous poison, traveling through the air, how else were the fevers being spread? If she could find something, anything, that connected the families in which members were stricken with the disease, she could find her pattern.

But all she had were names, written on a map in the approximate areas in which the families made their home. Dozens of families. Hundreds of names.

But still no pattern.

Still no answer.

She sighed and clutched the counterpane more closely about her shoulders. It was cold in her study. There was no fire. It didn't help, she supposed, that beneath the counterpane she was completely naked. She had left Reilly Stanton soundly asleep in her bed, the morning light filtering in through her bedroom curtains, and revealing that, in sleep, Reilly's face was every bit as handsome as it was when he was awake . . . but also bore a sweetly innocent look she highly doubted she'd ever see him wear waking.

She had stolen out into the main room and heated herself a bath, filling the portable copper tub—her father never had installed that porcelain one he'd always promised—one kettleful of steaming hot water at a time. She was not, she told herself as she bathed, washing away her sins . . . just the evidence of them.

When she was through, she wrapped herself in the counterpane, then crept into the study to stare, as she often did, at her charts.

Only this time it was not so much because she was hoping the answer, which had for so long evaded detection, might leap out at her. No, this time it was because she felt she needed to remind herself of just what, exactly, it was she was doing on Skye . . . and why it was so vital that she stayed.

She wasn't at all certain precisely what had happened that evening with Reilly Stanton. All she knew was that she had behaved in a most uncircumspect manner and that now she was going to have to pay the price for it.

And that price, she knew, was that she was going to have to choose: choose between what had become, over the past few months—maybe even years—an obsession, and something that, though she hardly liked to admit it, even to herself, was the most marvelous thing that had ever happened to her.

For that's what Reilly Stanton was. A marvel, something she had never thought to see in her lifetime: a man who both respected and admired her, but at the same time seemed fully aware of her faults—which he tolerated with mild amusement. And in bed . . . oh, God, she blushed to think of all that had happened, all they had done, in her girlhood bed.

It wasn't fair. She shouldn't have to choose. Why had Reilly Stanton come into her life *now*? In a few weeks, the weather would be as warm as it had been last year, when the infections had first started. She couldn't leave, not now. People were depending on her—not only to help them through what had every chance of being another epidemic, but maybe . . . possibly . . . preventing it from happening again.

But she wasn't going to get the chance . . . not if Reilly Stanton, who had already broken down so many of her defenses, succeeded in destroying this last one. Because he was determined, she knew, to marry her.

But she was also perfectly aware that that could never happen . . . not on Skye. For one thing, no matter how well Reilly seemed to have adjusted to life in Lyming, he was a Lowlander and always would be. It was as simple as that.

And Lowlanders, as everyone knew, could not take life in the rugged Highlands for long. Oh, he might put up with it, for her sake, for a while. But eventually, the longing to go back to his easy London life would become too strong.

But that was not the only problem. Not by far. There was Lord Glendenning to consider, as well. They couldn't marry, not with Iain MacLeod lurking about. The earl would never allow it. Brenna wasn't certain what she thought Lord Glendenning might do, but violence would almost certainly be involved. . . .

And violence most probably in the direction of Reilly Stanton.

Sighing again, Brenna stared down at her charts. But she was not, in fact, seeing them. Instead, she was remembering all that had occurred the night before: Reilly's smile, so quick, the humor behind it always so genuine. The way those smiling lips had felt against her mouth, her eyes, her breasts. The midnight supper they'd shared, when their own hunger—of a different sort than their hunger for one another—had finally managed to drive them from the bed. Moments filled with laughter, but more often, sighs of complete and utter contentment . . . at least on Brenna's part.

And she rather fancied, judging from the look of satiated gratification she'd seen on Reilly's sleeping face, that he felt as she did.

Why couldn't they, she wondered, simply go on as they were? Why had he had to throw about that marriage bit? She supposed he had been trying to make her feel better . . . and really, considering how wildly she'd behaved, she ought at least to be feeling a little badly.

But she didn't feel badly at all. Not about what she and Reilly had done. That had seemed both natural and right.

It was the marriage part that was bothering her.

Not that the idea of being married to Reilly Stanton didn't, in many ways, thrill her. To have all that delicious manly flesh to herself, forever? Quite an intoxicating proposal.

But it was the things that came along with such a marriage that dismayed her—

"What—" The deep, masculine voice startled her from her dark thoughts, and she gasped and spun around on the high stool upon which she sat. "—are you doing?"

But it was only Reilly who stood in the doorway. A Reilly who was every bit as naked as she was beneath the counterpane.

"Nothing," she said, aware that her heartbeat had sped up . . . though whether this was due to the start he'd given her, or the fact that his mere presence was so stimulating—not to mention the small matter that he happened to be naked—she couldn't say.

"You are not doing nothing," he said. And he padded, barefoot, into the study, stopping when he came to stand beside her.

"Ah," he said, when he saw what she'd been staring down at. "A bit early for that, don't you think?"

Brenna shrugged. The counterpane slipped a little off her shoulders. "I just thought," she said, "it might look differently than it did yesterday."

He raised his eyebrows. "An interesting theory. Because you are now a blossom that—how shall I put it?—has been plucked?"

She felt her cheeks grow warm. “Well,” she said, drily. “I wouldn’t put it quite like *that*. . . .”

“Here,” he said, lifting the edge of the counterpane, which drooped from her high stool to the floor. “Let me in under there. I want to have a look as well, if you’ll let me.”

She made room for him on the seat of the stool. He hooked a thigh over it, at the same time slipping an arm around her waist, as they both pulled the counterpane around their bare shoulders. In this intimate position, they sat and looked down at the chart on the desk before them.

“What’s this?” Reilly asked, pointing.

“That’s the church.” Brenna couldn’t help feeling amazed at the amount of heat that was already pouring off his body—heat her own body, which had grown chilled in the tomblike study, greedily absorbed. It was odd, to be sitting like this, with *him*, in this room she’d always been so careful never to show to anyone. In a strange way, it was far more personal than what had passed between them in her bed. Because there, Brenna had only opened her body to him. Now she felt as if she were laying open her soul.

“The tavern,” she said, pointing to various places on the map, so he could understand it. “And up there, the Mackafees’ place.”

He nodded. His gaze, as he took in the drawing before him, was shrewd.

“And this squiggly line,” he said, “is the burn, I suppose?” When she nodded, he said, “Didn’t receive very good marks in drawing now, did we? Or penmanship, I would say, for that matter. What’s that word?”

“North,” she said, offended.

“Oh, I see. It’s a compass. Really, you’ve quite abominable handwriting. I can’t make anything of it.” He looked away from the map and at her, instead. “So my artful seduction of you hasn’t shed any new illumination on your little theory, I take it?”

She shook her head. She was going, she supposed, to have to tell him eventually. The truth, that is, about why marriage between them was impossible . . .

But then he was pushing aside the counterpane, and studying, with a good deal of concentration, what lay beneath it.

“So is that what you do, day in and day out?” he asked. “Sit in this frozen little room, perched up on this clerk’s stool, and stare at your horribly drawn maps, hoping for inspiration?”

“Mostly,” she said, trying not to notice how his gaze, instead of being on her eyes, was trained somewhat lower, in the vicinity, in fact, of her breasts. “Sometimes I look at the soil samples I’ve

selected. One thing I know for certain, because of them . . . there is no putrid waste on this island. Not of the sort required for the formation of a gaseous miasma. . . .”

“Really?” Reilly did not sound particularly nonplussed by this information. “And that’s what you’re risking the wrath of your parents and uncle for? So that you can sit here and stare at your maps and sift through your soil samples without being disturbed?”

He had followed his gaze with a finger, and was now tracing the curve of one her breasts as delicately as if he were afraid that, with rougher treatment, she might break—something she was only too aware he knew wasn’t true.

“Well, not exactly,” she said.

It was getting difficult to speak, since the finger by her breast had dipped lower and was now running down her thighs—which she’d squeezed tightly together, in order to avoid his hand slipping even lower, something she was quite certain would destroy any hope at all she had of addressing him in a rational manner about this matter of marriage. . . .

“Reilly,” she said, trying not to be overly aware of the hand hovering so close to the downy curls at the site of her legs’ joining. “We’ve really got to—”

But then, to her utter disbelief, Reilly slipped off the edge of the stool and, with his share of the counterpane still draped across his shoulders, he stooped in the manner of someone who has dropped something upon the floor.

“Reilly,” she said, feeling a bit irritated. How were they to discuss this really very sensitive subject if he wouldn’t pay attention? “Are you listening to me? We have to talk about what’s going to happen next—”

“I am fully aware,” Reilly murmured, “of what’s going to happen next.”

And, to her very great astonishment, he expertly pried her knees apart.

“This,” he announced, “is what’s going to happen next.”

Before she knew what he was about, he had buried his face between her thighs.

This was not something she had been expecting—not in the least. It wasn’t anything he had, during the long hours they’d been abed the night before, tried.

That, then, might explain why, the moment she felt Reilly Stanton’s mouth on her most intimate area, her back immediately straightened, and she had to seize the desktop with one hand, while the other she sank into his hair.

“R-Reilly,” she squealed. The squealing she couldn’t help. His night’s growth of whiskers tickled

her inner thighs in a manner that was . . . well, hard to ignore. “What are you *doing*?”

“I should think that,” he said, his voice somewhat muffled, considering where his lips were, and the fact that the counterpane still covered them both to a certain degree, “that would be obvious.”

And a second later, it was. Brenna’s back went from ramrod straight to jelly, and she found herself fairly slipping off the stool due to the fact that her bones seemed to go limp the minute Reilly Stanton’s tongue laved her. If it hadn’t been for his arms, which he’d wrapped around her legs, securing her in her seat, she was convinced she’d have melted to the floor.

It was the counterpane that fell to the floor instead. Brenna felt it slipping off her shoulders but was incapable of doing anything to retrieve it—her hands were busy holding onto her sanity. She didn’t have time to worry about a counterpane.

Besides, she was hardly cold now that Reilly was there. He gave off enough heat, she was convinced, to warm even the frigid halls of Castle Glendenning. And with his mouth on her like that, she became convinced that she, too, would become a fireball and soon combust.

He didn’t let her. Instead, just as she was sure she was about to explode from the pleasure his talented lips—dexterous as his surgeon’s fingers—were giving her, he lifted his face from between her legs. Where his mouth and tongue had been, cold air rushed in.

Her eyelids, which had drifted closed, sprang open, and she looked at him in surprise, the part of her he’d been paying so much assiduous attention to, throbbing and full.

Then she realized that he, too, was throbbing and full. That, in fact, was why he had stopped. Now he stood before her, his desire for her blatantly obvious . . . and so desperately did he need to assuage that desire that there was no time even to move to the bed. Instead, he drove himself into her exactly where she was, perched on her high clerk’s stool. His arms circling her, he cupped her buttocks in both his hands and brought her up hard against the base of his shaft with each thrust, all the while nuzzling her just below her ear lobe, and whispering things. . . .

Things she couldn’t hear, because she was too busy *feeling*, her legs around his waist and her hands behind her, clutching the back edge of the stool for support. Her head was flung back, and she could feel the ends of her hair brushing against her knuckles each time she tilted her pelvis to meet his driving thrusts.

It was like it had been the night before, with one difference: it was even better. How was it possible that each time she thought he’d taken her to the brink, to the very height of ecstasy, he managed to push her further yet? She would, she was convinced, go mad from all of this bliss. Even now, she was teetering on the edge of it—on the edge of heaven. One push, one more lunge, and she was gone. . . .

And then she really *was* gone. Her sanity shattered into a thousand pieces, each one shimmering like a raindrop caught in a sun shower. The crystalline shards of her reason fell all around her,

kissing her skin before tinkling to the floor.

And still, even as she clung to him, boneless from her climax, he ground himself relentlessly into her, until at last he found his own relief . . . but not until he'd bent her body back across the stool and against the desk, until her thick dark curls were spread all across her illegible map . . . the same map he dropped his forehead to, when, finally spent, he collapsed against her.

“Now,” he said, when, panting heavily, he lifted his head. “What were you saying?”

Only she hardly knew. It didn't, she supposed, matter. Not when there were so many more interesting things to discuss. Like, for instance, how long it would be before they could do that again.



Not long, as it happened. They were recovering from another, similar exertion when a thump sounded on the cottage's front door.

After yesterday's rain, the new day had dawned bright and fine. And as the sun climbed higher in the sky, the warmer the air became, until it drove the chill from the cottage, and they were able to lie in bed without needing the counterpane or any other covering. When the banging on the door began, a completely naked Brenna sat bolt upright in the bed.

"Lord Glendenning," she said quickly. "Oh my God, hide!"

Reilly did not feel in the least like hiding. In the first place, why should he? He had staked his claim—so to speak—and so saw no reason not to let the earl know it. In the second place, he was so lethargic and content, he did not feel like moving. Truth be known, he was also rather sore—a natural result, he felt, of having made love as many times in a row as they had over the past sixteen hours; Brenna, he imagined, was probably in far more discomfort than he was—and didn't feel up to anymore gymnastics.

"I mean it," Brenna hissed, as she struggled into the blue gown. "Hide."

"I'm not hiding." Reilly rather enjoyed watching her struggles. He would never, he had decided, get tired of looking at Brenna Donnegal's naked body. And even clothed, it remained a source of continued interest to him. "And how do you even know it's him?"

"Jo only squawks like that when it is. Can't you hear her?"

And indeed, he could hear the crow cawing in the outer room. She sounded thoroughly outraged.

Brenna had hurried to her dressing table, and now she ran her fingers through her hair. "I knew this was going to happen," she muttered. "I *knew* it. Now he's going to kill you, and it will be all my fault."

Reilly raised his eyebrows. "I take umbrage at that. I am perfectly capable of taking responsibility for my own actions, even if it does, as you seem to think, mean my death."

"If you won't hide, at least promise me you won't come out of this room. Do you hear me, Reilly?"

Brenna flung a beseeching look, which really was rather hard to resist, over her shoulder. “If he finds out what we’ve been up to, he’ll murder you without another thought.”

“Posh,” Reilly said. Really, but she was pretty when she was all in a dither.

“I mean it.” More thumping on the door. Brenna called, “Coming!” then turned back toward him again. “Whatever happens, stay in here. For your own good.”

“I don’t suppose it’s ever occurred to you,” he said, waving his injured knuckle in the air, “that I’m as good with a blade as I am with my fists.”

“Just stay in here,” Brenna pleaded. “Not just for your sake. For mine. I certainly don’t need the fact that you spent the night here spread around the village. I’m in enough trouble with Reverend Marshall as it is.”

That, Reilly was disappointed to note, was the only rational reason she’d given for his staying put. Sourly, he agreed to stay where he was. But as soon as she’d gone out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her, he leaped from the bed and began putting on his clothes, which had dried at last from their dunking in the burn.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Brenna said, hurrying to the door. What, she wondered, could Lord Glendenning want? He did not make a habit of coming to the cottage much—mostly because, as she knew only too well, the minister wouldn’t like it much, if he found out. Something dire indeed must have driven the earl here. . . .

And when she flung open the door, she found out what it was.

“Is he here?”

Lord Glendenning pushed past her and strode into the sitting room, with the dishes from her supper soaking in the washbasin, and various other evidence of her sins lying about: the door to her study, which she had forgotten once more to lock, lying wide open; the fire in the hearth, which she’d let burn out; the complete lack of any signs of breakfast having been undertaken at any point that morning.

“Is who here?” Brenna demanded, with what she hoped would sound like the asperity with which she normally addressed the earl. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I havena been able to find him anywhere.” Lord Glendenning ran his fingers through his overlong, ink-black curls. He seemed genuinely concerned. “He didna come back from the Mackafees, Moira said. But he isna there. They havena seen him since yesterday. . . . He split Harold Mackafee’s lip, you know.”

Brenna, rolling her sleeves up to her elbows, decided she had best tackle the dinner dishes. It would seem the most normal thing for her to be doing, and it would keep her from having to look at the earl as she lied to him. Despite the elaborate deception she and her friends were orchestrating

upon her uncle and parents, Brenna was not a very accomplished liar.

“Reilly Stanton, I suppose you’re talking about,” she said, plunging her hands into the icy water. “Well, he isn’t here, as you can plainly see.”

But Lord Glendenning, rather than going as she hoped—though didn’t expect—him to do, pulled one of the chairs out from the table and lowered himself into it, with a great deal of popping noises from his protesting joints—not to mention from the chair, not built to take so great a weight.

“I canna think where he can be,” the earl said, worriedly. “Do you think Mackafee and his lot disgusted him so much he left the island?”

“Don’t be daft,” Brenna said, rinsing a cup.

“I’m no’. It could happen, you know. Stanton can be downright sensitive—like a woman, I sometimes think. The way he fussed over the MacGregor boy—”

“Whom you very nearly killed,” Brenna reminded him impatiently.

The earl waved a dismissive hand. “But it turned out all right in the end. I saw him just now—the MacGregor boy. Left about an armful of daisies on your doorstep.”

Brenna, surprised to hear this, smiled. So little Hamish was not as ungrateful for their help the day before as he’d seemed! Reilly, she knew, would be pleased to hear it.

“Had to kick ’em out of the way to get by,” Lord Glendenning continued. “Still, he’s a verra disgusting fellow. Mackafee, I mean. Maybe that’s why Stanton went. Many’s the time I’ve wanted to fatten Harold Mackafee’s lip myself.”

Brenna snorted. “Is that so? Well, you’ve exercised remarkable restraint then, all of these years.”

Lord Glendenning looked offended. “A peer like myself canna be going about, hitting his subjects. It wouldna do. Besides, one blow from me ‘twould be likely to kill a man.”

She snorted again. “Oh, of course. I suppose I ought to congratulate you, then, for sparing the poor man.”

“You should.” Lord Glendenning’s gaze fell upon the barren hearth. “What?” He looked bemused. “No tea this morning, then, Brenna?”

She kept her gaze on the soapy water. “I was getting to it.”

“Slept in, did you?” The earl smirked. He seemed to find her uncharacteristic lethargy amusing. “I’d have liked to, too. Only those Lowlanders showed up.”

Brenna placed a single teacup in the drying rack. Two teacups would, of course, tip off the earl that

she'd had a guest, so she let the other languish in the soapy water and went to work on the teaspoon, instead.

"What Lowlanders?" she asked.

"The ones that showed up this morning looking for Stanton, of course." The earl glanced irritably up into the rafters. "Canna you shut that bird's beak, Brenna? I'll do it for you, if you like."

"You'll do nothing of the kind." Brenna went to the door and, picking up her skirt, flapped it. "Jo," she said, looking up at the clearly discomfited crow. "Out. Now."

The bird, with many dissatisfied squawks, flew down from the rafters and strutted indignantly from the cottage. Brenna closed the door firmly after her.

"Who showed up looking for Dr. Stanton?" Brenna asked, trying to keep from showing the very keen interest she felt at hearing this particular piece of information.

"Two blokes," Glendenning said. "Or gents, I should say. Quite done up, they were, in the latest gewgaws from London. One of 'em had a silver cane, and the other wouldna stop smoking the foulest-smelling cigar you ever smelt."

"Goodness," Brenna said mildly. She wondered if Reilly, in the bedroom, had overheard this. She could not see how he could have failed to do so. "Whatever did they want?"

"Had some news," the earl said with a shrug. "For Stanton."

"Nothing bad, I hope," Brenna said.

"Well, I hardly think they'd have traveled all this way if it was good." Glendenning tipped his chair back—ignoring the ominously creaking legs—and said musingly, "You know, Brenna, I dunna think I ever saw you doing the washing up before."

She clattered a plate into the drying rack. "It's not quite as challenging as lancing a hematoma," she observed, "but I manage."

The earl did not apparently notice the sarcasm in her tone.

"I like it," he declared.

She threw him a hasty glance over her shoulder, not liking the drop in pitch his deep voice suddenly took.

"I suppose," she said, made further nervous by the very bright glow in his piercing blue eyes, "you like it because it reminds you of Flora."

"I'm no' talking about Flora right now," he said, in that same deep voice. He let the chair legs drop

back down to the floor.

Her heart beginning to hammer inside her chest, Brenna quickly reached for a dishtowel, drying her hands in case she needed to use them for something other than wiping plates. She wished heartily that she'd had time to don shoes. She did not relish trying to dodge the earl in bare feet, since his own were so large and so prone to trod upon hers during moments such as these.

"Flora," she said quickly, "is a much better dishwasher than I am."

"But she doesna look so good," the earl said, "doing it as you do, Brenna."

And then the earl stood up. The chair in which he'd sat fell over backward with a clatter behind him, he'd risen so abruptly, but he failed to notice this.

"Brenna," he said in that same deep voice, and took a step toward her. The look of lustful longing on his handsome face would have broken the heart of any other girl, but Brenna found herself looking frantically about the sideboard for a knife.

Except, of course, in the end it turned out she didn't need one. Lord Glendenning had no sooner closed the distance between them when the door to Brenna's bedroom was thrown open. Reilly Stanton, fully clothed, came strutting into the sitting room as if he owned it.

"Hullo," he said, when he saw the earl. "You were looking for me?"

If it hadn't been such a serious moment—Brenna standing there with her fingers just a fraction of an inch away from the bread knife she had fully intended to brandish in Lord Glendenning's face if he came any closer, and the earl with his hands raised, ostensibly to take her by the shoulders and kiss her, as he was sometimes wont to do—Brenna supposed she'd have burst out laughing. After all, the earl's expression was something to behold. He looked as stunned as if someone had prodded him with a fish fork.

"I take it my friends are waiting for me at the castle?" Reilly reached up casually to adjust his cravat. "You'll have to pardon them, my lord. When I initially wrote, I informed them that that was where I was staying. The castle, I mean. I neglected to mention in my latest missive that I'd moved into the dispensary. Well. Shall we go, then?"

Lord Glendenning still had not lowered his hands. Brenna, not knowing what else to do—but fully conscious that she did not want to be anywhere near those massive fists if a fight broke out—ducked beneath his extended hands and hurried to the far end of the sideboard, where she pressed herself against the wall and wondered how on earth, if the two men went at one another, she was going to prevent blood from being shed.

"What," Lord Glendenning asked, in a much more normal tone, "are you doing here, Stanton?"

"Me?" Reilly's dark eyes were wide with wonder at the question. "I might ask you the same

question.”

“Me?” The earl’s reply was an unconsciously comic echo of Reilly’s. “I came here looking for you!”

“Well, you found me. And now I think we have bothered Miss Donnegan long enough, don’t you? We had both better go.”

“But you—” The earl’s gaze darted toward the doorway through which Reilly had just strolled. “But that’s Brenna’s bedroom.”

“Yes,” Brenna said, before Reilly could utter another word—and dig his own grave even deeper. “That’s right. Dr. Stanton was just here helping me with a small matter.”

Lord Glendenning looked from Brenna to Reilly and then back again.

“In your *bedroom*?” he cried.

“Indeed,” Brenna said, coming away from the wall and throwing her shoulders back, in an effort to show she had nothing to hide. “It was . . . a personal matter. A *medical* matter.”

The earl’s black eyebrows came together in a rush. “You’re ill?” he demanded. “You don’t *look* ill.”

That was probably very true. Brenna supposed she had never looked healthier in her life, considering how she had spent her night and morning. Nevertheless, she persisted with her story, saying, “Well, this is a medical matter that doesn’t, um, show.”

Lord Glendenning, however, was not having any of it. He glowered.

“You’re saying that with as much as you know about doctoring,” he hurled at her accusingly, “you had to have this bloke come around to have a look at whatever it is?”

She nodded. “Indeed. You see, I, um, couldn’t quite reach it. . . .”

This had evidently been the wrong thing to say, since the earl exploded, “What the bloody hell was it?”

Reilly, however, was unruffled. “Calm down, old bean,” he said. “Just a mole. Nothing out of the ordinary. Miss Donnegan was right to consult with a professional. Those things sometimes have a way of turning nasty if not tended to. Though in her case, it turned out to be quite harmless. Thank the good Lord.”

Lord Glendenning still looked unconvinced.

“Where *was* this mole?” he demanded.

“*Really*, my lord.” Brenna’s blush was not in the least feigned. She truly could not believe she was having this conversation and would have quite preferred for the earth to open up and swallow her whole than continue it.

But the earl was not in the least sensitive to her feminine sense of delicacy.

“Well, Brenna,” he declared. “What am I to think? You say the bloke’s not here, and then he comes out of your *bedroom*? I’d like to know what Reverend Marshall would have to say about *this*, I surely would.”

“And I’d like to hear what Reverend Marshall would have to say about you standing in my own cottage, accusing me of—well, I don’t know what!” Brenna’s indignation was as genuine as her blush. “Now, really, my lord, I think you have insulted me in every way possible. Kindly leave at once.”

Glendenning frowned. He fairly radiated his displeasure.

“I’ll go,” he said sullenly. “If *he* does.”

On the word *he*, the earl nodded toward Reilly.

Reilly took his hat from where he’d crushed it, in his coat pocket, and tugged it back into some semblance of shape—although it would never, Brenna saw, be the same as it was.

“Fine,” he said. “Miss Donnegan, it has been, as always, a pleasure. I shall, I am certain, be seeing you again very soon, I hope.”

Brenna murmured, faintly, “Yes, of course. Very soon.”

To Glendenning, who stood scowling suspiciously at them both, Reilly said, “My lord, if you’re ready . . .”

“I’m ready,” the earl said. He nodded curtly to Brenna. “Good day to you, then, Brenna.”

“Good day to you, Lord Glendenning.”

She showed the men to the door. Reilly would, she realized, have to fetch his horse from the stable where it had shared the night with her mare. She hoped Lord Glendenning did not wonder why the doctor, who’d claimed only to be making a house call, had bothered completely unsaddling his mount.

It wasn’t until she’d closed the door behind them and gone back into her own room, to stare in horror at the evidence of her nocturnal sins, that she realized Reilly had left his medical bag behind.

Hefting it, she turned to go to the door and call to him that he’d forgotten it. But as she did so, a book dropped from an outside pocket and fell open to a page upon which she glimpsed her own name.

Curious, Brenna lifted the book, and saw at once that what she'd found was Reilly Stanton's private journal. The page that had so irresistibly drawn her eye read, *Failed to save a man's life last night. Was shown up in front of entire village by Amazon in trousers. Name of Brenna, but not like any Brenna I've ever known.*

And after that, of course, she forgot all about letting Reilly know he'd forgotten his bag, and sat instead upon the floor.

And read.



“**G**ood God, Stillworth.” Charles Abernathy Pearson III removed the cigar from his mouth and gaped. “What is that thing on your head?”

Reilly’s hand went up defensively to his forehead. And then he remembered—the hat he had crushed in his haste to rescue Brenna from the odious advances of the Earl of Glendenning.

He removed the offensive article and said, “Kindly remember, gentlemen, you aren’t in London anymore. No one here really gives a hang how you look.”

St. John Christopher Fleming Shelley turned away from the suit of armor in which he had been trying, unsuccessfully, to catch a glimpse of his reflection, and let out an anguished cry upon seeing his old friend, and the fashion low to which he had sunk.

“Blast you, Stillworth,” Shelley cried. “Have you forgotten everything I’ve labored so long to teach you? It doesn’t matter if other people don’t give a hang how you look. What matters is that you always look your best. And you, my lord,” Shelley seemed to feel obliged to add, “look like hell.”

The earl, who’d been following behind Reilly as the two of them entered the great hall, pulled up short and, looking down at himself, asked with some indignation, “I do?”

Reilly, with a meaningful glare at his two friends, said, “Please refrain from making light of *his lordship’s* attire. I assure you he is dressed in the height of Highland fashion.”

Pearson and Shelley exchanged puzzled glances.

“Only four months in the wilds of the Hebrides,” Shelley drawled, “and the man’s already lost his sense of identity. I was talking about *you*, for God’s sake, Still—”

“Oh, yes, that’s right.” Reilly slapped his old friend rather harder on the back than was, perhaps, strictly necessary. “You’ll have to excuse my friends, my lord,” he said, to Glendenning. “They have an odd habit of milording me. I can’t think how it started.”

Removing his cigar, Pearson offered, drily, “Possibly round about the time you insisted on calling yourself the Marquis of Stillworth.”

“Right.” Reilly moved to slap Pearson on the back, as well. “What a lot of laughs we had over that one, didn’t we? The idea! *Me*, a marquis!”

Pearson, who’d begun to choke on a cloud of smoke when Reilly slapped him, said between coughs, “It is a bit astounding, I suppose, when you think about it. I mean, no real marquis would bother going to school all those years and getting his physician’s license, now, would he?”

“And if he did,” Shelley added. “He certainly wouldn’t actually *practice*. Unless, of course, he was a fool.”

Glendenning let out an uneasy laugh. He had still not quite recovered from the shock he had gotten, seeing Reilly Stanton come out of Brenna’s bedroom, and continued to throw suspicious glances in the physician’s direction. Reilly didn’t care to compound this shock by revealing that he was, in addition to being Brenna’s secret lover, a marquis.

“Well, you see, gentlemen?” The earl threw back the edges of his cloak. “I managed to find your friend, like I said I would.”

“Good show,” Shelley cried. He lifted a glass of whisky he’d apparently been offered by Lord Glendenning’s manservant, in the earl’s absence. The fact that it was only just after ten in the morning did not seem to bother Shelley—or Pearson, either, who was raising his own glass—in the least.

“And where was he, then?” Pearson wanted to know.

“At the home of the prettiest girl in the district, I shouldn’t guess,” Shelley went on, drolly. “That’s generally where he could be found back in London, right, Chas?”

“Right,” Pearson agreed with a chortle. “Inspectin’ her moles.”

Lord Glendenning threw a look of such fury in Reilly’s direction that the latter was forced to let out a great horse laugh and said, “Ho, now, chaps! That’s a good one. So what brings you to Skye? I must say this visit is *quite* unexpected.”

Pearson and Shelley exchanged glances. They were finally starting to realize, from Reilly’s odd looks—not to mention comments like that one—that something wasn’t quite right.

“Well, uh,” Pearson said slowly. “We had a bit of news, actually. . . .”

“Something we didn’t like to put in a letter.” Shelley, the taller but more foppish of the pair, pushed some of his baby-fine blond hair from his eyes and leaned upon his silver-tipped cane. “But perhaps it’s something you’d best hear in private.”

“Indeed,” Pearson said. He stubbed out his cigar in a rather tarnished silver platter Raonull had evidently provided for that purpose, and fingered his thick brown mustache. “Er, no offense meant, of course, my lord,” he said to the earl.

The earl, however, did not get the hint. He dropped into his favorite chair, the one closest to the fire—which today did not burn so bright as usual, the day being a warm one—and looked at Reilly and his friends expectantly.

“It’s something,” Shelley said, throwing Reilly a confused look, “of a rather *personal* nature, Still—I mean, Stanton.”

“That’s quite all right. Anything you have to say to me you can say in front of Glendenning.” Reilly found a chair of his own, and placed it where he could watch the earl without appearing too obvious over it. After what he had witnessed in Brenna’s cottage, Reilly would be damned before he’d ever let Glendenning out of his sight again. Not until he had Brenna safely under his protection by way of marriage, anyway.

And probably not even then.

“The earl and I,” Reilly went on equably, “are old friends. Aren’t we, Glendenning?”

“We certainly are,” his lordship said. Though his tone was friendly, it was probably no coincidence that the earl chose this moment to pull his ancestral broadsword, which he habitually wore, from its scabbard, and begin to polish it.

Pearson and Shelley exchanged alarmed glances. Reilly merely leaned back in his chair and said, “Well, gentlemen. Do go on. I trust the mater is well?”

Not certain how else to proceed, Pearson and Shelley both found chairs—and if the bottoms of which were a bit ragged, and the seat cushions smelled a bit of dog, they tactfully restrained from mentioning it—and settled into them, clutching their whiskies like sailors clutched at lifelines.

“Er, your esteemed mother is very well, Still—I mean, Stanton.” Pearson touched his mustache, as was his custom. “Saw her the other day at the ballet.”

“Your sisters, too.” Shelley seemed to be having trouble getting comfortable in his chair. He squirmed to find an adequate position on his seat cushion. “All well. Glowing, actually. Marriage seems to suit them.”

Reilly did not miss the fact that Pearson kicked Shelley hard, in the ankle, though he was certain the other man meant to do so surreptitiously.

Shelley yelped and took a long swallow of his whisky.

“Yes,” Reilly said evenly. “I am prodigiously fond of all my brothers-in-law. And my nieces and nephews? No bad news about any of them, I hope?”

“No, quite well, quite well.” Pearson hastened to assuage his fears. “All . . . well, however many

of 'em there are now. It isn't actually about your family that we're here, Still—Stanton. You see—”

“I didna know you had sisters, Stanton,” the earl said.

Reilly glanced at Glendenning. He was running an oiled cloth carefully up and down the length of his blade.

Reilly smiled sunnily at him. “Indeed,” he said. “Four of 'em.”

“Younger than you?”

Reilly inclined his head affirmatively. “The baby, Julia, just married last autumn.”

“Ah,” Glendenning said. He held the hilt of his sword to his nose and pointed the blade in Reilly's direction, peering down it, ostensibly in order to detect any nicks. “Your old ma must be looking forward to you slipping on the shackles, then, eh?”

“Rather,” Reilly said carefully.

“Actually,” Pearson said, “that's rather why we're here, you see. Isn't it, Shelley?”

Shelley choked a little on the whiskey he'd downed when the earl had pointed his blade at Reilly. “Right,” he gagged. He got up to pour himself another glass. “Reilly, old man,” he said. “Can I get you some of this excellent stuff?”

“I'm fine,” Reilly said with a complacent grin.

“Er, I think you might need a little.” Pearson swallowed. “When you hear our news.”

“Well, if it isn't the mater,” Reilly said, “and nothing's wrong with any of the girls, then I can't imagine what this heart-stopping news of yours could be.”

Shelley, who'd poured out a whisky for him in spite of Reilly's demur, thrust the glass at him. “It's like this, Stanton,” he said, when Reilly had taken the whiskey from him. Then, flopping back down into his chair, he flung a consternated look at Pearson. “Oh, I can't do it, Chas. You do it.”

Pearson glared. “You really are an ass, Sinjun,” he said. Then, turning toward Reilly in his chair, he said, “Look, old bean. It's like this. Your Miss King's tied the knot with that donkey's behind, Ethelridge.” He leaned back and downed the contents of his glass as if this news had, in some way, personally affected him.

Reilly, however, merely stayed exactly as he was . . . although his eyebrows raised a little.

“That's it?” He looked from one old friend to the other. “That's why you came all this way? To tell me Christine got married?”

Shelley, as if he could take the suspense no longer, leaped from his chair and began to pace.

“Not just married, old man!” he cried. “But married to that blighter Ethelridge! Why, he’s five times the wastrel any of us ever were! I heard he’s got half a dozen by-blows livin’ in a country convent. And that woman—the one who accused you of all those heinous things, none of which were true in my eyes—well, she’s gone and married him! She’s an out-and-out hypocrite. That’s what she is, and always was. Doesn’t it gall you, man?”

Reilly wasn’t in the least bit galled, however. Any wound Christine might have caused him had long since healed and had not left so much as a scar. The time he’d spent in Lyming had seen to that.

“On the contrary,” Reilly said. “I wish them the best.”

His two friends exchanged worried glances.

“I say, old bean,” Pearson said. “You’re taking this awfully well. We thought you’d be . . . well, fairly unhappy with the news.”

“Considering,” Shelley added, “that the whole reason you came out here was to impress her. Hypocritical Miss King, I mean.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Pearson said, “everybody’s talking. Ethelridge came into his fifty thousand pounds only last month. Your Miss King didn’t waste any time. Your twenty a year is nothing to it. I understand they’ve bought a townhouse on Park Lane. That’ll eat up that fifty thousand right quick.”

“And I heard—” Shelley’s voice dipped to a conspiratorial whisper. “—she didn’t even wear white.”

“Now, gentlemen.” Reilly set his whisky on the floor, there being no table nearby. “Let’s, by all means, be happy for the bride and her lucky groom. There’s no need to cast aspersions on the character of either party.”

Shelley looked alarmed. “But Reilly,” he cried. “It’s clear now that Christine King was nothing but a money-grubbing parasite. She had all of us completely fooled with that whole holier-than-thou act. And you once called Ethelridge a pair of monkey’s boll—”

“There’s something wrong here.” Pearson interrupted his friend. He was staring intently at Reilly. “We expected you to go completely apoplectic over this bit of news, Reilly. But you’re taking it as easy as if Christine King were just a girl you once knew, and not your former fiancée.”

“Right,” Shelley said, not even trying to hide the disappointment in his voice. “You were head over heels for her, remember? You could at least smash something.”

“Him smashing things won’t accomplish anything,” Pearson said, with an irritated glance at

Shelley. "Except entertain you."

"Is that so wrong?" Shelley wanted to know.

"The fact is, Reilly," Pearson went on, as if the other man hadn't spoken, "besides imparting the bad news, we came for another reason. To bring you home."

Reilly blinked at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"That's right!" Shelley, as if suddenly remembering something, smacked his forehead. "There's no reason for you to stay on this benighted island. Not anymore. Miss King's married, so it isn't as if you'll be proving anything to her. Well, you might be, but it won't matter, because she isn't available any longer. So start packing up your duds, old man."

"Home?" Reilly looked from one man to the other.

"Yes, *home*," Shelley said, enthusiastically. "You remember it, don't you? *London*, old bean. Where you can order up a meringue anytime you choose. Where the women don't wear trousers. . . ." He shuddered distastefully. "How you could have waxed so eloquent over *that* particular detail in your last letter, I still cannot fathom—"

"I'm terribly sorry," Reilly quickly interrupted. He pushed himself up from his chair. "But I'm afraid I won't be heading home. Not just yet, in any case."

"Won't be—" Pearson looked at Shelley in some consternation. "But didn't you hear what we said, old bean? Christine's shackled to old Ethelridge now. There's no *reason* for you to stay."

"On the contrary," Reilly said. "There's every reason for me to stay."

And though a part of him, of course, meant Brenna, there was another part—not as large, truthfully, but there just the same—that meant something else entirely.

"I cannot, after all," Reilly added, marvelling a little at the truth of the words even as he uttered them, "simply abandon my patients."

"Your *patients*?" Shelley screwed up his face in disbelief. "Who gives a hang about your *patients*, man? *You can come home now*. Water from taps, my friend. Indoor privies. Or don't you remember what that's like?"

"Thank you for the reminder," Reilly said. "But I'm afraid I made up my mind quite some time ago not to return to my London practice." Although he had not realized it until just that moment. And as he realized it, he was filled with a sort of contentment he had not, he believed, ever known before.

"You see," he went on, "I'm needed here. Now, if you'd be so good as to—"

"I don't believe it," Shelley cried. "Do you, Chas?"

Pearson shook his head, clearly dumbfounded. “I see him standing there before me,” he said to Shelley. “And his lips are moving. But what’s coming out between them . . . no, I can hardly credit it.”

“Neither can I,” Shelley agreed. “I say there,” he bellowed at Reilly. “Who are you, and what have you done with our good friend Stanton?”

Reilly, who had always thought Pearson and Shelley the best of company, found himself gritting his teeth. Really, but had they always been so insufferably mutton headed, or was it something that had happened since he went away? Couldn’t they see he *wanted* to stay?

Apparently not. Was he going to have to stand there and spell it out? That he had come, over the months he’d been away, to consider Lyming his home, and its people his family? Was he really going to have to explain to them that, with the weather getting warmer, the threat of another cholera outbreak was very real, and that he could not possibly abandon the village now, when they needed him most?

And then there was Brenna, of course. But he couldn’t possibly tell them about her, not with Glendenning sitting there, stroking that blade. . . .

Maybe he wouldn’t have to say anything at all. They seemed to have come to their own conclusions.

Shelley gasped and seized Pearson’s arm.

“Lord!” he cried. “Something horrible’s just occurred to me.”

Pearson eyed him narrowly. “What?”

“The reason why he won’t go with us.” Shelley cast Reilly a suspicious look. “He’s found religion.”

Pearson snatched his arm away from Shelley’s clutching fingers. “Don’t be an ass.”

“Why else would he want to stay?” Shelley glanced fearfully at Reilly. “You aren’t going to start quoting Leviticus at us, are you, old bean?”

“No,” Reilly said, his teeth still gritted. “But I might throw you across the room if you don’t stop acting like such a pair of dunderheads.”

Shelley’s eyes widened. “*Dunderheads*? Now that’s low. . . .”

“Stop it.” Pearson held up both of his hands for silence. “Both of you. Be quiet. I’ve got to think.”

And he did so, frowning with the effort of it. Reilly longed to toss the two of them out on their ears, but doing so would undoubtedly arouse the earl’s suspicions. Why, Glendenning was bound to

wonder, was Reilly so anxious to rid himself of his guests? In order to speed his way back into the embraces of one Brenna Donnegan, perhaps?

No, it was better to try to get rid of them in a less violent—and less obvious—manner.

Pearson, bringing his hand down from his mustache, which he'd stroked gently as he'd thought, announced, "It makes no sense. The man comes all this way in an effort to prove himself to that harpy, the King girl, and then, when he hears she's married another, he doesn't show any sign at all of dismay—"

"Or smash anything," Shelley reminded them all, woefully.

"—but only wishes the bride and groom the best of luck. And then when it is suggested to him that he might come home again—rejoin his loved ones and all the comforts of his undeniably privileged life in London—he politely declines. There's simply no rational explanation for it. Unless—"

Pearson broke off, throwing Reilly a startled look. "Good God!"

Shelley, fearful he'd missed something, glanced from one man to the other. "What? *What?*"

"Gentlemen." Reilly held out his right hand to them. "I thank you for coming all this way, and letting me know about Miss King's—or should I say, Lady Ethelridge's—good fortune. But now I'm afraid I have some calls to make. As you well know, the life of a practicing physician is never an easy one."

Pearson got up from his chair, strode forward, and grasped his hand. As he clutched it, he pulled Reilly forward into what would have looked, to Lord Glendenning, like a friendly hug. What it actually was, however, was a ruse so that Pearson could whisper into Reilly's ear, without fear of being overheard, "You *dog!* Who is she?"

"Never you mind," Reilly whispered back. "Just get out of here, and for God's sake, don't come back."

"Is that what's going on here, then?" Pearson's hug was taking, as far as Reilly was concerned, far too long. "That silly fellow over there warm for her, too? I *thought* he seemed a good deal moodier than when we first met up with him earlier this morning. What happened, then? He catch you in a clinch with his light of love?"

"Good-bye," Reilly said, hastily breaking the embrace. He turned to Shelley. "It was so nice seeing you again. Love to the mater, if you see her."

Shelley, however, also pulled him into a hug.

"It's not the Amazon, is it, Reilly?" he whispered. "Please say it's not the one you wrote about, the one with the trousers. Your mother will expire from shock. I swear she will."

Reilly broke that embrace as well, and said, “You’d better hurry, if you’re to make the ferry back to Lochalsh.”

Glendenning, in his chair by the fire, snorted.

All three men turned to look at him.

“My lord?” Reilly questioned. “Something amuses you?”

“The ferry.” Glendenning chuckled to himself. “There won’t be another one. It’s Wednesday.”

Reilly, feeling oddly deflated, turned back toward his friends. Good God, was he *never* to get back to Brenna?

“He’s right,” he said heavily. “There’s only one ferry on Wednesdays.”

Pearson and Shelley glanced at one another.

“Why?” Pearson asked, after a bit.

Reilly shrugged. “I don’t know why. It’s just the way of it here on Skye. I’m afraid you’ll have to stop the night.”

Pearson merely looked surprised by this piece of information. Shelley was the one who cried, as horrified as if someone had suggested he eat his firstborn.

“*Here?* We’ve got to stop the night *here?* On *Skye?*”

Now that Reilly had realized he was not going to be rid of the pair at all easily, he accepted his fate and decided to make the best of it. He laid a friendly hand upon Shelley’s shoulder.

“Come now, old bean,” he said cheerfully. “It isn’t that bad.”

“Isn’t that bad?” Shelley glanced around the great hall, a look of distaste plainly written on his handsome face. “And where do you suggest we stay, then? There’s an inn, isn’t there? Please tell me there’s an inn.”

Reilly pursed his lips. “Well, no. There isn’t an inn.”

“I knew it.” Shelley raised his eyes to the flying buttresses overhead. “A manger. We’ll have to stop the night in a manger.”

“Nonsense.”

A diabolically wicked thought occurred to Reilly. He was not prone to great strokes of genius, but

this one, he felt, was really quite brilliant. Taking his hand from Shelley's shoulder, he turned toward the earl and said, "Oh, I say, my lord. You wouldn't mind if my friends holed up here for the night, would you?"

Glendenning looked up from his sword, startled. "*Here?*"

"Right. Here at the castle. I'd have them at the dispensary, of course, but if I happened to get any patients . . . well, you know we've only got the three cots. You wouldn't mind if they bedded down here, now, would you, old chap?"

It was beautiful. Exquisite in its simplicity. Reilly could not believe it hadn't occurred to him straight away. What better way to accomplish his twin goals—spend as much time as possible in the company of Brenna Donnegal, while keeping a sharp eye on the activities of Lord Glendenning. It was lovely. It was perfect. It was—

"They dunna want to stay here," the earl said, in some alarm. "What about the ra—"

"Oh, Pearson and Shelley don't mind roughing it a bit," Reilly interrupted. "They shan't be bothered in the least by a few mice."

"Mice!" Shelley echoed, in horror.

"I'm no' talking about mice," Glendenning said. "I'm talking about the ra—"

"Would you," Reilly said, taking his pocket watch from his waistcoat pocket, "look at the time? Why, I'm late for my first appointment. You gentlemen stay here, if you would, and *keep his lordship company*—"He could not, of course, put too much emphasis on the words, or Glendenning might get the wind up; still, he tried to give Pearson a meaningful look, so he'd get the message. "—and I'll try to join you in the evening, if I can, for supper."

"Stanton," Glendenning said, standing up, his sword dangling loosely from his right hand. "I—"

But Reilly was already backing from the room.

"So sorry I can't stay," he said. "Shelley, why don't you show his lordship that trick you do. You know, the one with your thumb—"

And while Shelley was attempting to dazzle Lord Glendenning with his remarkably dexterous thumb, Reilly managed to beat a retreat from the castle, and, finding his horse, headed back for Burn Cottage at a gallop that, it was later remarked by Hamish—who, in spite of the doctor's orders, had gone straight back out to mind his flock, just as soon as he, Lucais, and the lamb had dried off after their adventure in the burn—was like to break his neck, if not that of his mount.



I cannot, Brenna read, think of her without being reminded of the pale pink roses which grew outside my sister Cecilia's bedroom window. She strikes me as just as delicate and ethereal as those blossoms, which the slightest breeze could rob of their incandescent petals.

Her eyebrows raised, Brenna bit noisily into the apple she was eating for lunch. Chewing, she turned the page.

I have not seen her today. It is as if the sun has disappeared from the sky. I can feel no heat from the fire in the hearth before me. It is only she that is capable of warming me. I live for her smile, die by her frown—

Brenna, hearing hoofbeats, looked up. A horse and rider were approaching, and at no mean pace. From the tree branch in which she lay, she could see that the horse was a gray, much like the one belonging to Reilly Stanton. She returned her gaze to the page before her.

What will she say when she sees me this evening? Will she tremble? Or pretend not to care? I am in agonies of suspense. Why does she torture me in this manner? No, I must not say that. She is incapable of artifice.

Reilly Stanton pulled up his horse just short of the cottage's front door. Calling her name, he sprang from the saddle and went in without bothering to knock.

"Brenna?" she could hear him shouting. "Brenna, where are you?"

She calmly turned another page.

She is not like the sun. Because that implies her temperament is fiery. And it is anything but. She is as cool and mysterious as the moon.

Reilly, having apparently completed a circuit through the cottage's interior, came outside again, and stood, squinting in the sun, scanning the burn.

"Brenna?" he called again.

Brenna dropped her apple core onto the ground, some eight feet below, and began to read aloud from the book she held.

"*And like the moon controls the tides,*" she read, "*she controls my moods—happy when she is happy, and sad dened by all that saddens her—*Oh, Reilly." She broke off and looked down at him. "This really is dreadful."

He came to stand beneath the tree, craning his neck to see her amid the leafy branches.

"Brenna?" He stared at her. "What are you doing up there? Are you insane? You'll break your neck. Come down at once."

"I don't think so," she said, coolly. "You see, I'm so enjoying what I happen to be reading."

He squinted up at her. Then, seeing what she had in her hands, he said calmly, "That's private, you know."

"Yes," she said, turning another page. "But then, so was my study. And yet you felt not the slightest qualm about going in there. Against my wishes, I might add."

"But that," Reilly said, "was different."

"How?" She peered down at him. "How was it different?"

"Because that was before," he said. He began to look for the branch by which she'd pulled herself up to such a height. "Come down, Brenna. I want to talk to you. And stop reading that book. It's full of idiocies."

"I should say so. Shall we sample one of my particularly favorite passages?" She propped the journal up again and read aloud. "*Burn Cottage is all that is charming, picturesque as a Gainsborough. Christine would highly approve rustic thatched roof. Only one prob: currently occu pied by Amazon.*"

She lowered the book and glared down at him. "That, I take it, would be me."

Reilly stood with his hands on his hips, looking up at her. "Are you really," he asked, "going to hold what I wrote in that stupid book against me, after all that's happened between us?"

"I most certainly am," Brenna informed him. "I am, after all, an Amazon, and am probably incapable of any sort of higher feeling—"

“Brenna.”

“—unlike this Christine of yours, whom you liken, in the pages I’ve read so far, to a rose, the moon, and, in one particularly revolting passage, a newly born fawn.” Disgusted, she hurled the book, and its pages and pages of tribute to Reilly Stanton’s former fiancée, at his head, missing only because he managed to duck just in time.

“Well, if she means so much to you, you had best go back to her, don’t you think?” Brenna demanded. “I’m certain you’ll be doing all of us a very great favor if it will silence your pathetic mewling on the subject—”

This last sentence ended in a shriek as Reilly, tired of listening to her, reached up and gave a very determined tug on the hem of her skirt, which hung down just a few inches above his head. Unbalanced, she tumbled off the branch where she’d been sprawled, and dropped neatly into his waiting arms.

Her nose suddenly just an inch or two from his, she eyed him with a great deal of surprise.

“If you’re quite finished,” he said, drily, “perhaps you’ll let me have a chance to talk now?”

Her only response was to turn her face pointedly away from his.

“Fine,” he said. “First of all, everything I wrote in that book was put there months and months ago—”

“Yes,” she said, whipping her head around to glare at him. “I noticed. You’ve fallen off disgracefully since coming to Skye. Not a word after that last Amazon comment—”

“Quite. And do you know why?”

“I suppose,” she said acidly, “that after the pages and pages you wrote about Christine, your hand finally cramped up—”

“No,” he said, patiently. “Because I’m happy.”

Her eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed angrily again. “Oh, yes,” she said. “The fact that you’ve fallen in with a lot of half wits and Amazons would make any man—”

“Listen to me.” He kept a firm grip on her, since it seemed to him she might, like a fish, try to wriggle away. “All that drivel I wrote about Christine was just that. Drivel. Drivel written by a boy who thought he was in love. Brenna, I didn’t know what love was until I met you. And once I did, I realized it isn’t something you can record in a journal. Words can’t describe it. Nothing—not all of Shakespeare’s sonnets, or any love song known to man—even comes close to describing what I feel for you—what I’ve felt for you since the first moment I laid eyes on you. That’s why I stopped writing. I didn’t write anymore because I couldn’t. There is no language in the world that holds the

words I'd need in order even to begin describing my love for you."

Brenna looked perceptibly less sulky—but not by much.

"Well," she said. "You certainly found words enough for Christine. *Incandescent* and *ethereal* and *delicate*. While all I got was *Amazon*. *In trousers*. How do you think that makes me feel? Well, I'll tell you. Not good."

"You want words?" He slipped his arm out from beneath her knees, but kept the other tightly around her waist, so that though she stood on her own two feet, she was still anchored to him. With his other hand, he lifted her chin, so that she had no choice but to look him in the eye.

"Fine," he said. "I'll give you words. You, Brenna Donnegan, have a voice that reminds me, not of bells, like other women's, but of smoke. Rich wood smoke, from a fire built to keep away the winter cold. Smoke that wends and curls its way through the skin and lungs, until it settles around a man's heart, like a warm blanket."

Brenna, looking up at him, blinked. Just once. Encouraged by her silence, he went on, "When I look into your eyes, I don't see your soul. I see the sky. Sometimes clear, like today—a great, open expanse of blue, through which your thoughts, like gulls, dive and dart, playful and alive. Other times the sky is overcast—clouds of gray, skirting the edges of your irises, hiding the sun—but never for long. The sun is always just there, shining behind the clouds, waiting for your laughter to come and scatter the rain away. And laughter is never long in coming to your eyes, Brenna.

"Your skin?" He lifted one of her hands and looked down at it. She followed his gaze. "If all the silkworms in China were fed on nothing but cream, they would still never have a hope of producing anything as soft as this patch of skin right here." He ran his thumb over the back of her hand, then lifting her hand, pressed his lips to it, as well. "Your skin is the way people who've never seen snow imagine it feeling. It's the finest, smoothest chocolate, poured hot from a kettle, into a cup. It's a fresh pat of butter, left in the larder to cool. . . ."

"And your soul?" His lips, having burned a trail down her hand, past her wrist, and across the softness of her inner arm, met the impossibly tender spot where her shoulder met the base of her neck. "It's the sea. Giving. Generous. Abundant. Never still . . . ceaselessly moving, but always with a purpose. Determined, yet demure. Indomitable, but also dangerously volatile. Salty—" His mouth, now just a fraction of an inch from hers, whispered the next words: "But sweet."

She was staring up at that mouth like someone who'd been mesmerized, her own lips moistly parted. Reilly asked, softly, "Were those enough words for you, or would you like some more?"

She reached up and, seizing hold of either side of his face with her hands, dragged his mouth down over hers. "No, thank you," she said, against his lips. "That was adequate. Will you make love to me now?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

And they sank down into the cool, fresh grass.

It was dizzying, this power he had over her. How, with mere words, he'd made her melt, the way he'd made her melt that morning in her study. Now that same tongue, without even touching her, had wound a similar kind of magic, and she was desperate all over again to feel him inside of her.

But that was all right, because he, she couldn't help noticing, was desperate to be inside her. Even as he pulled her down atop him, she felt his need prodding urgently at her hip. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to swing one leg, still swathed in her velvet skirt, over his hips, and straddle him where he lay—although he did look a bit surprised by her boldness.

Surprised, but pleased.

“So that's the way it's to be,” he said, his voice, as it always seemed to do when she was as close as this, dropping a few octaves. “I leave it in your capable hands then, madam.”

And he lay back, the same look of sweet innocence on his face he'd worn when he'd been asleep—with one difference: his gaze was on her naked breasts, which he'd managed to reveal by expertly undoing, once again, the buttons down the front of her dress.

Brenna, having several pairs of her own, was not at all ignorant as to the manner in which gentlemen's breeches fastened. In just a few quick motions, she had the front of Reilly's undone, and had unloosed that part of him which she'd felt a few moments before pressing against her with so much eagerness. She took it into her competent fingers now—observing as she did so that Reilly's eyes, previously heavy lidded with passion, were wide open, and watching her interestedly—and, wriggling expertly out of her own undergarment, applied it to the area of her body where, she felt, it would do the most good.

His words had readied her. No caresses were necessary. She was slick with desire for him. She sank down upon his staff, closing around him tightly, her long skirt hiding the sight of their joining from his eyes. He could not see it, but he could feel it, hot and wet. His gaze, like his fingers, went to the opening of her gown. They were in the shade, but a few slanting rays of sunlight made their way through the leaves, and kissed the silken mounds of her breasts.

And then she moved—just the tiniest fraction of an inch—and his eyes rolled back into his head. His hands went instinctively to her hips, to direct their undulations. He couldn't imagine how it was possible that he could be so swollen with need for her after they'd already made love so many times, but there it was: he was pulsing thickly inside her, so that her smallest movement brought him closer and closer to release.

But he wouldn't allow himself that release. Not yet. Not until she was there with him. And she wasn't there yet . . . but she soon would be. He could tell by the hectic flush that had spread across her lovely cheeks. Her head was thrown back, revealing the long white column of her throat, in which he could see her pulse leaping. Her eyes were closed, her teeth clamped down on her lower lip, her

hands, oh, her hands were on his as he pressed his palms against her small pink nipples. . . .

And then she moved again—just a little—and he was lost.

But so, he realized, as he spiraled into the oblivion of another earth-shattering climax, was she. For she had cried out, her back arching, and her hips suddenly still. She stayed frozen like that, while he ground against her, thrusting himself deeper and deeper into her, filling her, drowning her, he was convinced, with each wracking spasm. . . .

But when he was through, she only smiled, and sank forward against him, laying her forehead to his shoulder, every bit as spent, he realized, as he was.

After they'd lain like that for a little while, listening to the birds and, off in the distance, the bleating of a flock of Highland sheep, he inquired lazily, "And now do you promise never to read my journal again? If I ever start keeping one again, I mean?"

"I will," she said, to his collarbone. "If you promise never to go into my study again. Providing I have anything in there I don't want you to see."

"It won't matter. I can't read your horrendous handwriting anyway." He smoothed some of her wildly mussed curls from her face. "I can see that I shall be at a distinct disadvantage in that respect."

She didn't smile at this, as he expected her to. Instead, she lifted her head and looked down at him seriously. "And what did Lord Glendenning have to say," she asked, "when the two of you left here this morning?"

"Not very much." Reilly leaned up on his elbows. The ground beneath him was not as comfortable as he'd initially thought. "Does he do that often, Brenna? Menace you like that? Because I'll gladly cure him of the habit—"

She slid from him and sat up. He couldn't see her face because it was hidden behind her hair.

"You didn't," she said, "say anything to him. About us, I mean. Did you?"

He pushed the hair aside, so he could see her eyes.

"Would it bother you if I did?"

"Yes." The gaze she turned on him was hot. He had not lied when he'd told her that her eyes reminded him of the sky. Now they were blazing August noon sky. He could feel the heat of the sun in her gaze. "Because he'll probably try to kill you."

Reilly regarded her lazily. "Will he, now? And you were so quick to tell me, all those months ago at the castle, that Lord Glendenning isn't that bad. . . ."

"He isn't," Brenna said. "Except where his pride is concerned. He's a MacLeod, first and

foremost, and MacLeods are warriors.”

Reilly lifted a single brow. “You have that little faith in my ability to defend myself?”

“No, of course not! Only . . . well, he’s got that really big sword.”

Both of his eyebrows were up now. All he said, however, was, “I wouldn’t worry about Lord Glendenning, if I were you. He’s got Pearson and Shelley keeping him busy at the moment. The friends of mine from London who showed up this morning, looking for me.”

“Oh, yes.” She scraped more thick red hair from her forehead. “Whatever did they want?”

“Oh,” he said, adjusting—and then fastening—his breeches. “To see how I was getting on out here in the wilderness. . . .”

He spoke lightly, but the truth of the matter was, he knew that his time was running short. Pearson and Shelley’s near use of his title had made that clear. He was going to have to tell her the truth sometime, and it was probably better to get it over with now, than wait until she discovered it accidentally.

And so he said, “Listen, Brenna. There’s something I’ve got to tell you—”

She turned those azure eyes up at him. “Oh?”

“Yes. Er . . .” Just how deeply, he wondered, did her antipathy toward the peerage run? He stood up, his nerve momentarily lost. “Fasten your dress, and let’s go inside and talk. Those sheep sound like they’re getting closer. But I don’t feel like leaping into the burn to rescue any of them again at this particular moment, thank you very much.”

She did as he said, buttoning up the velvet gown, then put both hands in his and let him pull her to her feet.

“We have rather a lot to discuss, you and I,” he tried again nervously.

“I suppose we have,” she said. “Like how we’re going to keep Lord Glendenning from finding out about all this. . . .”

“Oh, you’re not going to start that again, are you?” Reilly dragged a hand through his hair. “It might surprise you to know that I can take care of myself. I’ve managed it for thirty years.”

“I know, but—”

“Listen, I have something to say first, before we get into all that—”

“Fine.” Brenna bent to pick up his journal, which lay open at her feet. “You go first, then. But you know, Reilly, we can’t possibly—”

But Reilly was not to hear just what, exactly, they couldn't possibly do. Because the moment Brenna bent down, he heard a report that startled the birds from the treetops and sent the flock of sheep he could just see rounding the bend beside the burn running at top speed.

Then something very hard struck him in the shoulder, knocking him right off his feet.

He heard Brenna call his name and saw her drop his journal. The pages in it had been turned over far too many times to withstand this rough treatment, and they broke away from the book's spine.

The last thing Reilly saw, before darkness closed over him, were the pages from his journal scattering in the warm spring wind.



“ *W*here is he?”

Charles Pearson, coming blearily out of his nap, opened his eyes and beheld a vision.

At least, it *looked* like a vision. He had never actually beheld a vision before—unless one counted that time he’d spied the parlor maid tripping naked through the family rose garden at midnight, an old Celtic tradition said to inspire love in the heart of the beau of any young woman who tried it. Unfortunately, in Colleen’s case, it had only ended up earning her the sack when Mrs. Pearson realized that the beau Colleen had in mind was her eldest son, Charles.

Who, sitting in Lord Glendenning’s great hall, blinking groggily, thought to himself that Colleen had, it was true, been more of a vision than the one that had sprung up before him now, but only because Colleen hadn’t been wearing any clothes. This one, clad in a long gown of clinging blue velvet, with pearl buttons that went all the way up to her chin, was fully dressed, but happily lacked Colleen’s spots and overbite.

And the buttons, Charles could not help notice, were not completely fastened. No, they appeared to have sprung apart at a rather crucial point, and as the girl panted—she had obviously not simply materialized there upon the hearth, but appeared there through some less spritely method, possibly by running—he was given a glorious view of her really quite magnificent breasts.

“Didn’t you hear me?” The vision had a husky but rather impatient voice. That, he supposed, was in keeping with her great mane of red hair, which flew about in curls reminiscent of Medusa’s bewitching head of snakes. “I asked you *where he is*.”

Then Pearson, coming fully awake, realized she wasn’t a vision at all. She was a woman. A living and breathing woman—strikingly beautiful but with a rather wicked temper, as was evidenced by the fire iron she was leveling at his throat.

Clutching the arms of the chair he was slumped in, Pearson glanced frantically about the room, looking for help. The only other person he could see was Shelley, slumped in a chair of his own, and sleeping soundly. They’d had to rise shockingly early that morning in order to catch the ferry from Lochalsh, and had both grown rather sleepy after luncheon, which had, unfortunately, consisted of haggis.

“I’m going to ask you one . . . more . . . time. . . .”

The fire iron came disturbingly close to his nose. In fact, it was touching his nose. A second later, the pointiest part of it actually went *into* his nose, causing one of his nostrils to stretch rather painfully. He didn’t dare move, for fear the skin would become severed from his face.

“I suppose you mean the earl,” he said carefully.

“That,” the vision said, in a steely voice, “is precisely who I mean. Now where is he?”

Pearson said, “I beg your pardon, madam, but I don’t know. He was here a moment ago. I’m afraid I must have fallen asleep—”

Then a door banged, and the earl—the earl, thank God, the earl—cried, in his unmistakable brogue, “Brenna! What are you doing here? And why are you stickin’ that fire iron up Mr. Pearson’s nose?”

Instantly, the cool metal left Pearson’s face. He collapsed in boneless relief. . . .

But was not completely insensible to the drama unfolding before him.

For the vision, who apparently bore the unlikely name of Brenna—a name, funnily enough, that he and Stillworth and Shelley had always attributed to unattractive women—swung the fire iron, and brought it, in a magnificent arc, down upon the arm the earl threw up in a hasty attempt to defend his skull, which the young lady had clearly been aiming for.

“Are you mad?” the earl thundered, reaching out and wrapping a hand around the fire iron, then giving it a vicious tug. “What can you be thinking, swinging that thing at me?”

“I’m thinking you shot Reilly!” the girl roared right back at the earl. And then she called the earl a number of names that Pearson had never before heard uttered by a lady . . . and he was using that term in its loosest vernacular.

“Shot?” Pearson rubbed his face. His nostril hurt. “Reilly’s been shot?”

“Yes,” the vision snarled. She still had hold of her end of the fire iron and was trying to wrench the other end from the earl’s fingers. “By this great—” More shocking language followed.

Pearson, beginning to grow alarmed, got up and kicked Shelley in the calves.

“Get up, old boy,” he said. “*Get up.*”

Shelley opened one eye, saw the vision, and then opened both eyes. “I say,” he said, observing the tug-of-war on the fire iron. “Who’s the fetching wench?”

Glendenning had, by this time, managed to snatch the metal tool from the vision’s hand, and tossed it across the room. The vision, undeterred, launched herself, fingernails first, at the earl’s face.

“This is no good,” Shelley said, dismayed. “She’s likely to hurt herself.”

“She says Glendenning shot Stillworth,” Pearson informed his friend, as the two of them went to work prying Brenna from the earl, who had sunk to the floor.

“What?” Shelley, succeeding in wrenching the girl from Glendenning, held onto her waist as she fought to break free of his restraining arms. “Stillworth’s been shot?”

Brenna, twisting in his grasp, grunted. “I don’t know who Stillworth is. Someone’s shot Reilly, and I’ll wager everything I have it was this great—”

“Good Lord,” Shelley cried, though whether in response to the information that Stanton had been shot, or what followed it, in the form of the girl’s highly descriptive opinion of Lord Glendenning’s parentage, it was hard to tell.

“Is he dead?” Pearson felt someone needed to take charge of the situation. He had heard, of course, tales about these Highlanders—that they were a wild, unprincipled lot—and realized that the someone was going to have to be him. Accordingly, he seized the girl by the wrists—to keep her from clawing her way out of Shelley’s restrictive embrace—and demanded, “Reilly. Is . . . he . . . dead?”

All at once, the fight seemed to go out of her. She sagged in Shelley’s arms and no longer resembled, as she had just moments before, an avenging Valkyrie, but simply an exhausted girl.

“Not yet,” she said, in tones of heart-rending pathos. “The bullet missed any vital arteries, so I’ve got the bleeding stopped. But I can’t get it out. The bullet, I mean.” She raised shockingly blue eyes, swimming in tears, up toward his face. “It’s wedged too deep. He’ll die of blood poisoning, and it will be all my fault.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” Charles Pearson snapped his fingers. “Let go of her, Sinjun. She’s taking us to Stillworth.”

The girl—Brenna—shook her head woefully once she was free, and looked from one man to the other. She wasted not another glance on Glendenning.

“But what can *you* do about it?” she asked in a broken voice.

“What can we do about it?” Shelley laughed. “My dear, you’re looking at Sir Charles Abernathy Pearson III, one of England’s leading specialists in removing bullets. And I’m no slouch at it, either.”

Pearson, appalled at being called a specialist at such a thing, since the closest thing to a bullet he had ever removed had been an engorged appendix, was nevertheless thankful to Shelley for showing a bit of sense for once in his silly life. The girl looked relieved, and even reached up to dash the tears from her eyes.

“Oh,” she cried. “Oh, then come with me. Come with me at once!”

And she darted from the room.

Shelley glanced at the earl, who was daubing at the scratches on his face with one corner of his kilt, and murmuring over and over again, “I didna do it. I dunna know what she’s talking about. I didna do it.”

“What about him?” Shelley whispered anxiously.

Pearson gathered up his coat. “He’ll be all right.”

“No, but I mean . . . if he really did shoot Stillworth. Shouldn’t we . . . I don’t know. Make a citizen’s arrest or something?”

Pearson eyed the earl, who was trying to catch a glimpse of his reflection in the blade of his sword.

“He’s not going anywhere,” he said disgustedly. “Let’s go.”

As they left the hall, Shelley whispered, “Do you suppose that’s the girl? The one on account of whom he won’t leave this godforsaken place?”

“If she isn’t,” Pearson said decidedly, “then it’s a bloody crying shame, and we’d best let him die.”



Voices.

He heard voices. Muted softly. This was, in a way, more annoying than if they'd been speaking loudly. How was he supposed to be able to tell who was talking? Who was he to give the sack to, in the morning, for disturbing his rest?

Oh, Lord. And now there was weeping. Yes, definitely, the unmistakable sound of weeping. His sisters. They were weepers, the lot of them. Why couldn't Bates keep them out? That was all he needed, a bunch of women weeping over his bedside. Didn't they know by now he wasn't going to die? He'd been shot before.

Well, all right, maybe not, but he certainly wasn't going to die from a bullet in the shoulder. He was far too manly for that.

What had Bates been thinking, anyway, letting his sisters in? Dueling was illegal, except on the Continent. Now they'd go prating their little tongues all over town about how he'd lost this latest little tussle with . . . Just who had he been dueling with, anyway? He couldn't remember having lost any arguments lately.

Ethelridge. That name stuck out in his head. Had he been fighting with Ethelridge? But whatever for? The fellow was married to Christine now, and that was surely punishment enough for any man, wasn't it?

Then, suddenly, he was awake.

He didn't hear the sound of weeping anymore. Now he heard the gentle slap of . . .

Cards. Someone was playing at cards.

His gaze came into focus. He was in a strange room he had never seen before, in a wide feather bed with an ornately scrolled frame. Sunlight shone outside the windows on either side of the room, and there was a distinctive odor of baking apples.

Overhead, there were rafters, and above that, thatch.

No, he was not imagining it. Thatch.

At the end of the enormous bed sat Pearson and Shelley, in their shirtsleeves. He did not believe he was imagining them, either, because if he were, he was sure they'd be doing something a lot more interesting than what they were doing, which was playing casino.

"Ha," Shelley whispered. "Twenty-one. I win."

"Go and bugger yourself," Pearson suggested. "You can't have won again. It's impossible."

" 'Tisn't," Shelley said. "You didn't shuffle properly."

"I shuffled for a bloody hour. You cheated."

"How could I cheat? You dealt."

Reilly tried to ask them where he was and, more importantly, whether Brenna was all right, but when he opened his mouth, all that came out was a croaking sound.

But the croaking sound succeeded in capturing the attention of the two men. They stopped bickering over the cards and looked at him with some surprise.

"Oh, I say," Pearson said in a friendly manner. "You're awake. About time. How do you feel?"

Shelley hardly spared him a glance. He picked up all the cards and said, "I'll show you proper shuffling. Oh, hullo, Stillworth."

Reilly croaked again. Pearson said, "He wants some water. Get him some water, Sinjun."

"I got him the bloody laudanum," Shelley shuffled expertly. "You get him the water."

Pearson sighed, got up from the chair he'd been sitting in, and fetched Reilly a glass of water. Only when he tried to lift his right arm to take the glass, shooting stabs of pain coursed through him, and Reilly sagged back against the pillows.

Pearson looked unimpressed.

"Other hand, simpleton. You got shot on that side."

Reilly took the glass in his left hand and drained it. When the water was gone, he handed the glass back to Pearson and said, in a voice that sounded almost normal, "Brenna."

Pearson raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"Is she—" He cleared his throat. "Is she all right?"

“Don’t you remember?” Pearson screwed up his face and peered down at his old friend.

Reilly wished he had full use of his right arm. If he had, he’d have walloped his friend alongside the face with it.

“No, I don’t remember,” he ground out impatiently. “I’ve been unconscious, you great ass. Where is she? Is she all right?”

“Of course she’s all right.” Pearson looked taken aback. “And I must say, it’s a bit ungrateful of you to call me an ass. I’m the one who got the bullet out of you. Your precious Miss Donnegan couldn’t do it.”

“Only,” Shelley said, his gaze on the cards he was flipping from hand to hand, “because she was too personally attached to the poor blighter. Couldn’t bring herself to give the thing the good yank it needed. Afraid of hurting you more, I suppose. Fortunately, Sir Charles here didn’t share that particular concern. Put his foot against the headboard there and gave the thing the most vicious tug I’ve ever seen. Embedded in the bone, it was. A wonder it didn’t splinter anything.”

Pearson looked insulted. “I beg your pardon, but I treated the patient as gently as if he were a child,” he insisted. “My own child. Miss Donnegan could not have done a better job even if she thoroughly despised Stillworth—which by rights, of course, she should. She obviously does not know what a wastrel and a bounder she’s let herself get caught up with.” He tugged on his coat lapels. “It was clearly a job for a skilled professional like myself, and I performed it, if I do so say myself, with aplomb.”

“Please.” Shelley laid the cards aside and winked at Reilly. “He had to gulp down three or four slugs of whisky before he could bring himself to come near you. Looked like death warmed over, you did, Stillworth.”

Reilly, sore as he was, had no patience for his friends’ bickering. Still, he managed to summon up a few words of thanks before asking again, “Now where is she?”

Pearson and Shelley exchanged surprised glances, and Shelley whistled, low and long.

“So *that’s* how it is,” he said.

“I told you,” Pearson said to Shelley.

“Well, how was I to know?” Shelley looked annoyed—and disappointed. “I mean, a splendid girl like that . . . what would she want with a boob like Stanton?”

Pearson, shaking his head, looked back down at Reilly. “You’ve broken his heart, you know,” he said chidingly. “And mine, too, I’ll be sworn.”

“No wonder he didn’t give a fig about Christine’s marrying Ethelridge,” Shelley said, with a sigh.

“He had that luscious—”

“Where is she?” Reilly roared.

“Good Lord.” Pearson blinked down at him. “She’s in her bedroom, if you must know, and fast asleep . . . though I can’t say for how much longer, if you keep shouting like that. I had to slip her a draught to get her to lie down in the first place.”

“Draught of what?” Reilly tried to sit up.

“What are you doing?” Pearson looked alarmed. “You’ll ruin my artfully tied bandages.”

“Sod off,” Reilly advised him. The effort caused a light sweat to break out across his forehead, but he managed to get upright, just the same. “For God’s sake, Chas, what have you given her?”

Shelley looked at Reilly with interest. “You know,” he said, “for such a good physician, you make a damned bad patient.”

Pearson had set his jaw. “Look, here, Stillworth,” he said testily. “The girl was out of her head with worry for you—”

“When she wasn’t,” Shelley added, “homicidal.”

“Homicidal?” Reilly glanced from one man to the other, confused. “What do you mean?”

It was Pearson who replied. “Oh, only that when we first had the honor of becoming acquainted with your new lady love, she was attempting to apply a fire iron to the scalp of the man she thought had shot you.”

Reilly, flabbergasted, cried, “Good God!”

“It was delightful,” Shelley said, with relish. “I’m the one who disarmed her, in the end.”

“You didn’t,” Pearson said disgustedly. “Glendenning got the iron away from her. You just kept her from going for his eyes.”

“Glendenning?” Reilly moaned. “I thought I told you two to watch him for me!”

Pearson looked uncomfortable. “Well,” he said. “We might have dozed off. . . .” Seeing Reilly’s expression, he hastened to add, “But only for a short time.” Quickly, he explained the scene he and Shelley had wakened to.

“Fierce as a tiger cat she was,” Shelley felt compelled to add. “Never saw anything like it. Swung that poker like she’d been doing it from the cradle. If you’re seriously contemplating a life with this girl, Stanton, I’d take care: she’s a looker, but she’s got dead good aim.”

Reilly ignored this sage piece of advice.

“But she didn’t actually see Glendenning pull the trigger?” he asked worriedly.

“She didn’t see anything,” Pearson replied, “except you fall to the ground in a great dusty heap. Any other woman, of course, would have suffered a fit of the vapors, and you’d have promptly bled to death, and we’d all be at your funeral right about now. But the dauntless Miss Donnegan stopped the bleeding and valiantly attempted to remove the bullet, and then decided, when she couldn’t budge it, that the party responsible for this monstrous act must die. Which was, of course, where we came in.”

“Right. We came out here, picked you up, dusted you off, carried you to bed—” Shelley ticked each point off on a finger. “—removed the bullet, bandaged you up, drugged your lady friend, and played sixteen rounds of casino, of which I won twelve.” He glanced at Pearson. “Did I leave anything out?”

Pearson said, “Indeed. You forgot to mention that every woman in the district has been by the cottage at least once to weep over the young doctor’s bedside and leave him a pie for when he’s feeling better.”

“Oh, yes,” Shelley said, brightening. “I forgot about the pies.”

“And Glendenning.” Pearson yawned. It was clear to Reilly that, in spite of his friends’ nonchalance, they really had been exerting themselves very much upon his behalf in the past twenty-four hours. “He comes by periodically to check on you and renew his claims that he hadn’t anything to do with it.”

“Right.” Shelley nodded. “But he hasn’t brought any pies, so we’re not sure of the depth of his sincerity.”

Reilly asked, “And had he? Anything to do with it, I mean?”

“Naturally,” Pearson said, “the earl won’t admit to having been the one who pulled the trigger. Says he was out for a ride to clear his head . . . just the sort of thing he *would* say, of course, if he was guilty: there’s no one who’s admitted *seeing* him out on this ride—though there’s a strange little bald-headed boy who apparently saw something. . . .”

Reilly perked up at hearing this. “Hamish?”

“That’s his name.” Pearson snapped his fingers. “Anyway, he saw something, only he won’t say what. Frightened, I suppose, that the fellow might come after him next. Wants to talk to you, and you alone, about it. Been stopping by every so often, to see whether you’re awake.”

“Was it Glendenning he saw, do you think?” Reilly wondered.

Shelley neatened his stack of cards. “Your Miss Donnegan certainly does. That’s what I find so

interesting about it,” he said. “Why is she so certain it was the earl? Flung yourself into the midst of a love triangle, haven’t you, Stillworth? Not,” he added, “that I blame you. She’s a rum one, and well worth it. But you haven’t even tried to even the playing field by admitting to her that you’re a marquis. That’s hardly fair, now, is it?”

Reilly said nothing. He was turning over in his mind everything that he had just heard. Brenna believed that the earl had shot him? Brenna was so convinced that the earl had shot him that she’d attempted to kill him? Would Glendenning really have tried to kill him? Had he seen them—Reilly and Brenna—together in the grass? That, Reilly supposed, might provoke a killing rage in a man like the earl. . . .

And yet Reilly couldn’t help thinking—had thought all along—that there was something peculiar about the earl’s professed admiration for Brenna. He did not, Reilly believed, love Brenna for *who* she was so much as *what* she was . . . exactly what Brenna declared herself to be: the only woman on the island who wouldn’t have him.

“Well, old bean,” Pearson said. “Feel like a bit of pie? There’s quite enough to go round.”

Reilly, shaken from his thoughts, looked up.

“No,” he said, with sudden decisiveness. “No, I want to see her.”

Shelley raised his eyebrows. “Miss Donnegal? Don’t be daft. We’ve only just got her to sleep. You don’t know what she’s been through. Up all night, convinced you were going to hemorrhage—”

“Yes,” Pearson said, mildly. “Quite a little medical knowledge your Miss Donnegal has. Got it from her father, she says.” He reached out and plucked a set of framed miniatures from the top of a nearby dresser. “This fellow, apparently. This was his room, I take. Him and his wife.” He passed the miniatures to Reilly, who again tried to raise his right hand to take them, but, prompted by a wave of pain, stretched out his left instead.

He found himself looking down at two portraits, neither larger than the face of his pocket watch. Skillfully rendered, they depicted a handsome couple, the man dark haired with strong, clean-shaven features, and the woman a slighter, more elfin version of Brenna, with the same mass of ill-contained red curls, and the same bright blue eyes framed by black lashes.

Pearson looked down at the miniatures from where he leant with one elbow upon the headboard. “Dead, I take it, poor blighters?”

“Not at all,” Reilly replied, in some surprise. “They’re abroad. India.”

“Good Lord.” Pearson looked startled. “And left that flower all alone, to be plucked by the likes of you? Unconscionable.”

Reilly shot him a warning glance. “They left her in keeping with an uncle, if you must know. And I

intend to marry that flower, thank you very much, so you'll stay away from her, if you know what's good for you."

Shelley whistled again, then lamented, "Not fair. Why should *he* get such a corker? I'm far better looking than he is."

"As if you'd be willing to take a bullet for her," Pearson said, with a sneer.

Shelley pouted. "I most certainly would. So long as the scar wasn't too disfiguring—I say, Stanton, where do you think you're going?"

For Reilly was swinging his feet out from beneath the counterpane.

"To Brenna," he said, gritting his teeth against the pain. He found that, if he didn't move his right arm, there was no pain at all. This, he felt, was promising.

"Let us know if you need anything," Pearson called after him cheerfully.

"Yes," Shelley said with a snicker. "Like a stretcher."

Reilly did not smile at his friend's sarcasm. He was too busy concentrating on walking. It wasn't, he found, too terribly difficult, so long as he had something to hold onto, like a chair back or wall. That, he supposed, was on account of the laudanum. He would have to take care, he decided, not to let Pearson slip him anymore. He hated the stuff and wasn't convinced its benefits outweighed its drawbacks. . . .

Seeing him in the bedroom door, Sorcha, Brenna's dog, leaped up from her place beside the hearth and came to his side. As if knowing instinctively he was not up to his full strength, the dog did not leap upon him, but only sniffed his hand and then, tail wagging, walked alongside him, looking up anxiously into his face, her tongue lolling. He sank his left hand into her thick fur thankfully, telling himself her worried look was due to concern over his condition, and not a longing to be fed.

Incredible that he should be in this position, he thought. Shot! And just after he'd finally admitted aloud what he'd been thinking for several months . . . that at last he had found a place where he not only belonged but was needed. The idea that someone in the community he'd striven so hard to fit into might despise him enough to shoot him was thoroughly demoralizing. If that someone had been Glendenning, then, well, he could understand it. But what if it hadn't been? What if it had been someone else? Who on this island could hate him enough to want him dead, after everything he'd done—or tried to do, anyway—to prove his worth?

It was enough to make him think of packing up his bags and getting on that ferry with Pearson and Shelley in the morning. Ungrateful, uneducated, unworthy wretches. That's what Lyming was full of. If they didn't want him after everything he'd done for them, well, then, he'd go. See if he wouldn't.

But then he opened the door to Brenna's room and knew he couldn't leave Skye. Not without her.

She was asleep, just as they'd assured him. She slept on top of, and not beneath, the blue and white counterpane, her face resting on one arm, her long red hair spilling out across the pillows. Her gown, one he had never seen before, was a deep forest green. Against it, her skin looked extraordinarily pale. Too pale. Her breathing was too shallow for his liking—shallow and much too rapid.

Sorcha left Reilly's side and leaped up onto her mistress's bed. She sniffed at Brenna's face, then sat down, looking anxiously once more in Reilly's direction.

He commanded her to get off of the bed. The dog obeyed him with a sigh, and Reilly closed the door behind her as Sorcha trotted back out into the main room. Only then did Reilly sink down where the dog had sat, holding his right arm carefully aloft, so as not to jiggle it, and then position himself so that his body was curled against Brenna's.

He laid back against the pillows, feeling a sense of overwhelming exhaustion close over him. The laudanum, he told himself, knowingly. He started to let himself succumb to it, his eyelids falling slowly closed. . . .

When Brenna sat up, with a gasp.

She'd been having a dream. In it, she and Reilly Stanton had been standing in the grass beside Burn Cottage, kissing in the sunlight. It was lovely, being kissed by Reilly—really quite the loveliest thing in the world. Brenna felt, for the first time in her relatively short life, happy. Here, at last, she'd found someone—and not just any someone, but a man, and a handsome one, at that—who was willing to accept her exactly as she was. Such a man she had never hoped to find. She'd been fully prepared to spend her life in spinsterhood, performing her eccentric experiments and staring at her charts.

And then, suddenly, into her life came this man. She had hardly dared believe it, at first. A part of her still didn't believe it. Could there be such a man as this? A man who loved and respected her and didn't want her to change, not one little bit?

And just as she was opening her heart to him—opening her soul to him . . . he was taken from her.

In her dream, a shot rang out, and Reilly, who moments before had been so strong and vibrant, sagged in her arms. She hadn't even had the sense to look up and see who shot him. No, she'd only stood there as his heavy body slid down hers, streaking her dress with blood.

And everything—all the new things she had only just begun to hope for—disappeared in a flash.

She looked about a bit wildly, until he reached out and laid a hand upon her arm. Then she whipped her head around and stared down at him.

There he was. The man from her dreams, only this one was dressed in a nightshirt, one shoulder of which was hitched oddly because of the thick bandage beneath it. He had a thick, coarse growth of stubble across his chin and jaw, and there were violet circles beneath his eyes. . . .

But those eyes were still exactly as she'd first seen them—bright and warm and filled with laughter.

She let out a hitching sob and a second later, her arms were around him, and her head was on his chest.

“What’s this I hear,” he asked lightly, his voice rumbling in his chest beneath her ear, “about you trying to brain Lord Glendenning with a fire iron?”

She blinked. She could remember nothing, it seemed, from the moment he'd been shot, until now. Everything else had been a blur of blood and bandages and strange men making flippant remarks and calling him Stillworth. . . .

“Don’t,” she said, burying her face in his arm. “Don’t talk about it. It doesn’t matter, now that I know you’re all right.”

“It most certainly does matter,” he said. “If you’d killed him, they’d have hanged you as a murderess. And then who’d take care of that blessed bird of your brother’s?”

She shuddered all over. She couldn’t help it.

“It isn’t funny,” she said, into his nightshirt. “I thought you were dead. I—I didn’t want to live if you were dead.”

He would never know what the admission cost her. As she said it, all of the marrow seemed to leave her bones. She had never—never in her life—admitted to such a feeling. But, then she had never in her life felt such a thing. It was true. Without him, she would not want to live. That was how much she loved him.

“Well,” Reilly said. He’d felt his heart speed up a little at her choked words. That, he was certain, was *not* due to the laudanum. The depths of this girl’s feelings—this slim girl with the brilliant blue eyes and the aristocratic face, who seemed to be so much more suited to a ballroom than to this provincial block of rock—staggered him. That such a woman should feel so about him. . . .

It was simultaneously the most humbling and yet exciting thing he had ever experienced in his life. And it made him forget all about his resolve to leave Lyming at his earliest opportunity.

“That’s flattering,” he said. Oh, Lord, why had he opened his mouth? Or, if he’d felt compelled to, why couldn’t he have said something half as romantic as that? No, what came falling from his lips next was, “Morbid, but flattering.”

Was it the laudanum talking? It had to be. He fought against the thick cloud it had lowered over his senses.

“And I can’t help thinking that, seeing as how I feel the same way about you—” There. That sounded better. “—we’d best marry, and the sooner the better.”

She didn’t say anything. It took him a few seconds to realize that was because she was asleep again. Only this time, her breathing was deep and even. The color had returned to her cheeks. She looked, as always, lovely.

Perhaps she’d heard him. Perhaps not. In any case, they were together and that, for him, was enough.

He leaned down and pressed his lips against her smooth white forehead. “I’ll take that,” he whispered, “as a yes.”

And then he, too, slept.

Little did either of them know it was to be the last real sleep they’d enjoy for some time to come.



“ ‘*T* was Mr. Mackafee.”

Reilly had to stoop to hear the whispered words. The wound in his shoulder sent shooting pains through his side, but he stayed where he was, nonetheless. He wanted to make certain he’d heard the boy aright.

“Mackafee?” he echoed.

Hastily, Hamish MacGregor shushed him.

“Are you daft?” the boy demanded. “Not so loud. He said he’d kill me if’n I told anyone what I seen.”

Reilly glanced across the room. There were plenty of people to have overheard him. Burn Cottage was as crowded with visitors as church of a Sunday—a fact made even more apparent by the presence of the minister and his wife. Missing only was the cottage’s lovely mistress, who’d slipped out to administer a dose of tonic to Hamish’s little brother, who had snacked a little too gluttonously upon a blueberry bush he’d discovered, the fruit of which had been nowhere near ripe.

Brenna had left the cottage very reluctantly, and only after numerous assurances that Reilly would not remove his bandage or set off on any sort of campaign for vengeance against his would-be killer in her absence. He, for his part, had insisted she travel under the escort of Sir Charles Pearson, since the bullet which had pierced his shoulder might very easily have struck her. So long as the gunman remained at large, he would not trust her to go anywhere alone.

Only now, it appeared, he had a clue—more than a clue, actually—as to the identity of that mysterious gunman.

“ ‘Twas Mackafee, I tell you,” Hamish whispered. “Seen him with my own eyes. Took his hunting rifle to you. Saw me watching, and said if’n I didn’t keep my mouth shut about what I’d seen, he’d take it to me, next.”

Reilly nodded. “I see.”

Mackafee. Suddenly, Reilly’s world, which had gone all topsy-turvy since he’d been shot, began to

straighten itself out again. He had been more concerned, it was true, over the fact that someone in the island community had disliked him enough to shoot him, than the fact that he'd been shot at all. He had only just that morning been able to admit to himself that Skye was now just as much home to him as London had ever been . . . if not more so, because here on Skye, at least, he was undeniably needed. Physicians were plentiful in London. On Skye, they were scarce.

The fact that someone—and no matter how hard he'd tried, Reilly had never been able to convince himself that his would-be assassin had been Lord Glendenning; the MacLeods might, as Brenna had asserted, be warriors, but they weren't, Reilly felt, the type to shoot an unarmed man—hated him enough to want him dead had dismayed him. Hadn't he made a great effort to treat these people with respect, despite the fact only one in ten of them could read, and even less practiced what in London might be considered standard hygiene?

The depression over the realization that someone on Skye really, really didn't like him was far worse than the pain of the wound he'd sustained. All the work he'd done, all the strides he'd made, torn apart by a single bullet.

Until just now.

Mackafee. Of course. Mackafee was the one person on Skye who had good reason not to like Reilly, who had no reason to appreciate any of the work Reilly had done for the community as a whole.

What's more, Mackafee had sworn he'd get back at Reilly for that blow he'd delivered to his face, and by God, he had.

Suddenly, Reilly's world made sense again. The depression he'd been sinking inexorably into disappeared. The resolve he'd been making, secretly, to remove himself and Brenna from Lyming at his earliest opportunity, dissolved. Everything, he realized, was going to be all right.

Reilly straightened and looked down at the little boy who was gazing up at him so gravely.

"So if he told you not to tell anyone," Reilly couldn't help asking, unable to restrain a grin, "why are you telling me?"

"The way I see it," Hamish replied earnestly, "you saved my dog's life. Mine, too. So I owe you. I owe you quite a lot."

Reilly's grin broadened. Only a true Highlander would rank his dog's life as precious as his own.

"Consider your debt to me repaid," Reilly said, reaching out to touch the brim of the boy's cap. "I thank you heartily for the information."

Hamish looked up at him curiously. "Right," he said. "Question is, what are you going to do with it?"

What indeed? Reilly hadn't the slightest idea. One thing he knew for certain, now was not the time to discuss it. Not with Reverend Marshall and his wife so close by.

"We'll talk about it later," Reilly whispered to Hamish, who nodded sagely. The boy followed Reilly back to the table, where Reverend and Mrs. Marshall already sat, teacups in their hands.

"It isn't, of course, that we don't trust Dr. Stanton," the Reverend Marshall was saying to Shelley, who'd had the misfortune of being trapped at the table with the minister and his wife whilst Reilly and Hamish had gone to have their consultation.

"Far from it," his wife added, with a tight little smile in Shelley's direction.

"Of course not," Shelley said, holding his teacup with one pinky sticking out in the air, in what Reilly felt was really a rather cruel imitation of the minister's wife, who had an unfortunate habit of believing that, because she was the most important woman in Lyming, being the minister's wife, she had a right to put on airs.

"It's just that, as men of the world—" Here Reverend Marshall looked up as Reilly sank, careful of his wounded shoulder, back into his chair. "—you will agree that it does not look at all well, the three of you residing here, however temporarily, with a young unmarried female."

Reilly, a bit taken aback by the turn the conversation had taken since he'd left the table, was about to form a polite reply when Shelley blurted, "Not even when all three of us happen to be medical specialists, who can be trusted not to view the female form in any fashion other than with the upmost professionalism?"

Even Mrs. Marshall appeared not to believe this blithe assertion. She blinked astonishedly at it.

"Er," the minister said. "Be that as it may, I still confess I find it highly . . ."

"Irregular," Mrs. Marshall offered.

"—the three of you residing here with Miss Brenna. Not only irregular, frankly, but—"

"Wrong," Mrs. Marshall said decidedly.

"Interesting," Shelley said. "Miss Donnegan does not appear to find it so. And seeing as how she is the person most affected by our remaining here, it seems to me she would offer up some objection if our presence was, as you put it, so irregular."

Only she had not. Much to Reilly's chagrin, too. For some reason all her own, she seemed to welcome his friends, and had even made them up beds in her brothers' bedroom. Perhaps she was only grateful to them, for saving his life the way they had.

But Reilly couldn't help feeling there was something else behind it. Since her tender confession in

bed the day before, she could not stand to be alone with him. Why? He could not figure it out.

But he intended to get to the bottom of it, one way or another. See if he didn't.

The Reverend brrrred uncomfortably. "Miss Brenna," he said, "is a very young and, er, rather eccentric woman, who cannot be expected to know the most right and proper way to behave."

"Particularly," Mrs. Marshall added, "when her dear mamma is thousands of miles away."

"That is why," the Reverend Marshall said, "we took it upon ourselves to appeal to you gentlemen to do the right thing."

"Which is?" Shelley wanted to know.

"Why, the three of you," the Reverend said, in a tone that suggested he thought Shelley a bit dim, "must necessarily make alternative lodging accommodations."

"Good God!" Shelley threw an appealing glance in Reilly's direction. "Anything but that! Why, the only other place we could stay would be Castle Glendenning, and that place, I regret to inform you, is positively crawling with *rats*!"

At the mention of the word "rats," Mrs. Marshall gave an involuntary jump that caused half the contents of her teacup to slosh out. It was clear she had still not recovered completely from her last trip to the castle.

"My dear, my dear," the Reverend chided her, as he mopped up the spill with his handkerchief. To Reilly and Shelley, he said, "Surely there are other places you might stay, aside from the castle. My wife and I would not be adverse to the three of you remaining with us for the duration of your visit. . . ."

Mrs. Marshall recovered from her rat-induced trauma with remarkable rapidity.

"Yes!" she cried. "You must come stay with us! We would love to have you. My daughters, sirs, are truly the most accommodating hostesses. Such truly gentle girls . . . you will be treated by them like royalty."

Shelley, evidently liking the sound of this, looked at Reilly with his eyebrows raised hopefully. Reilly, with just the barest possible shake of his head, dashed his friend's hopes. The Marshall girls might, indeed, have treated them like royalty, but they would have a hard time extricating themselves from the young women's clutches, they were that man-hungry a bunch.

But before Reilly had had time to figure out how he was going to wiggle out of the Marshalls' invitation, Jo the crow let out an earsplitting squawk, and the front door to the cottage flew open with a loud bang.

Five startled heads—six if you counted the cat’s—swung toward the doorway. In it, silhouetted against the midday sun, stood Iain MacLeod, nineteenth Earl of Glendenning. In one hand, he held his ancestral broadsword; in the other, he carried a half-empty bottle of Mrs. Murphy’s best whisky.

“Stanton,” he said, weaving a little upon his feet. “I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

In a flash, the Reverend Marshall had his wife upon her feet and was murmuring his farewells as he hustled her from the room.

Glendenning, clearly roaring drunk, got politely out of their way as they left. He even wished them a good day, a nicety they seemed hardly to hear in their haste to flee the premises.

They weren’t five feet from the cottage when Glendenning drawled in a loud voice, “Thank God they’re gone. Canna stand ’em. Always with their paradin’ around those ugly daughters of theirs. As if I’d look twice at ’em, for all those doilies they knit. What’s a man to do with doilies in bed, I ask you?”

Shelley, delighted by this, burst out laughing. Even Hamish, taking in the scene with wide and astonished eyes, let out a giggle. Glendenning swung around and pointed his sword accusingly at both of them.

“Dunna be laughin’,” he said severely. “This is a serious matter between Stanton and myself.”

Shelley did his best to contain his humor, but only with difficulty. Hamish clamped his mouth shut, the sight of that sword enough to stifle his laughter.

“That’s better,” Glendenning said. “Now, Stanton.” He stood before the table, at which Reilly still sat, swaying slightly from side to side. “I know Brenna thinks I shot you. But the problem with her thinkin’ I shot you is . . . well, I didna know there was a reason to shoot you. No’ until she accused me of having done it. I’m no’ going to go into how I feel about that . . . although I think it a dirty, underhanded trick, what you’ve done, knowing full well how I feel about her.”

He drew himself up to his full six feet or so, and, puffing out his chest, finished with, “So what I come to say is, if I’d known what you were up to, I certainly *would* have shot you. As you know very well, I saw her first. By rights—” Here he pointed the broadsword at Reilly’s face. “—I should slice you open from navel to chin, and watch all your guts come slippin’ out.”

At this descriptive imagery, Shelley’s jaw sagged, though Hamish squirmed in obvious appreciation. Reilly, however, continued to regard Glendenning calmly from his seat.

“But as it happens,” the earl went on, lowering his sword as if it were suddenly too heavy for him to hold, “I am no’ a vengeful man. I am a MacLeod. And let it no’ be said that a MacLeod didna know good and well when the battle was done. And in this case, it appears you, Stanton, have won. I’ve decided to let you have her.” He paused with the whisky bottle halfway to his lips, as if remembering something.

“Oh, aye,” he added. “And I wasna the one who shot you, either.”

That said, he drank lengthily.

Reilly reached out and swatted Shelley’s hands before he could bring them together in a round of applause for the earl’s dramatic speech.

“I know,” Reilly said, to Glendenning.

The earl brought the bottle from his lips with a popping noise. The gaze he turned upon the physician was a shocked one.

“You know?” he echoed.

“Yes,” Reilly replied, with a nod.

“And what, exactly,” the earl said, looking a bit confused—clearly, he’d consumed more than a goodly amount of whisky already that morning—“would you be knowing, then?”

Reilly said, “That you weren’t the one who shot me, of course.”

Glendenning stared. Shelley cried, “And how would you know *that*?” Hamish, on the hearth, said nothing, only looked at Reilly, his eyes very wide beneath the brim of his cap.

“I know it,” Reilly said, in the same calm voice. “And that’s as much as anyone needs to know.”

“But—” Shelley’s gaze was stunned. “What do you intend to do about it, then?”

“Ah.” Reilly looked knowing. “That, my friend, is—”

He broke off as the sound of voices came from outside the cottage door, which Glendenning had left open.

“Ah,” Shelley cried. “Perhaps that’s our murderer now, come to finish the job.”

But it wasn’t any murderer. It was Brenna and Pearson, back from their visit to the MacGregors. Due to the long ride, Brenna had worn her trousers but had abandoned the sweater in deference to the warm air, and wore instead one of her father’s white shirts. The effect was one of which Reilly heartily approved, although he could not say he was particularly pleased that both Pearson and Shelley—not to mention the earl—seemed to approve of it, as well.

Brenna and Pearson had been chatting, but they both fell silent upon walking inside and realizing who sat at the table with Reilly and Shelley. Brenna’s cheeks, Reilly saw, turned a shade pinker, and her hands curled defensively into fists.

“*You!*” she burst out, her hostility toward the earl radiating from her in waves that were almost visible.

Though Reilly and Shelley both rose politely upon her entering the cottage, Glendenning stayed where he was . . . a slight for which Reilly eventually forgave him, since the man was entirely too drunk to think clearly.

“Aye, it’s me,” Glendenning said sadly. “Only dunna hit me anymore, will you, Brenna? I told Stanton it wasna me who shot him, and he believes me. You’ve got to, as well.”

Brenna threw back her head and laughed. There was no humor in her laughter, however.

“Why should I?” she demanded. “It’s exactly like you.”

“To shoot an unarmed man?” Glendenning, drunk as he was, still managed to set his jaw and look supremely indignant. “I would never—and you know it. No MacLeod would ever unload his pistol at a man who wasna armed. Besides—” Here he threw his shoulders back. “I’m a blade man, myself.”

Brenna did not look as if she were in the least bit tempted to believe him. But, perhaps realizing that his level of intoxication was so high, arguing with him would be unproductive, she grew uncharacteristically silent on the matter, even pressing her lips together to keep from saying more.

It was Pearson who, shedding his coat, observed the extra teacups and asked curiously, “Did you have callers, then, while we were gone?”

“The Marshalls,” Reilly replied. “Concerned for your moral welfare, Brenna. As well they ought to be.”

The blush upon her cheeks, he was delighted to see, grew deeper, and she shot him a disapproving look. Something, he knew, was bothering her—something more than the simple fact that he’d been shot. That was why she didn’t mind having Pearson and Shelley underfoot all the time. He was still determined to have it out with her. . . .

But not here. Not in front of all these people.

“Interfering old harpies,” Shelley said. “That’s what I think of them. Come and join us, you two. We’ll have some of Lord Glendenning’s lovely whisky.”

“Happy to,” Pearson said, and he quickly slid into the chair Mrs. Marshall had been sitting in just moments before.

“Hamish.” Brenna noticed the boy seated upon her hearth. “What are you doing here?”

Hamish blinked at her with wide, innocent eyes. “Nothing,” he replied sweetly.

She shot him a look which seemed to indicate that she did not believe him, but that she could think

of no crime with which to accuse him, just at the moment.

“Brenna,” Reilly said, speaking with as much deceptive innocence as Hamish had employed, “Lord Glendenning has something else he’d like to say. Haven’t you, my lord?”

Glendenning nodded. “Brenna,” he said. “It wasna me who—”

“No, not that,” Reilly interrupted quickly. “The other thing.”

Glendenning looked momentarily confused. “I dunna know—”

“About Brenna,” Reilly prompted him.

The earl responded with a scowl. “Dunna make me say it, Stanton,” he growled.

“Fine, then. I’ll say it for you. Brenna, Lord Glendenning wishes to extend his best wishes for our future happiness together.”

She glanced, wide eyed, from Reilly toward the earl. Glendenning, responding to a kick Reilly gave him beneath the table, grumbled, “Aye.”

“Really.” Brenna, though not entirely overcome with emotion, did appear to be somewhat moved, if her next words, though grudgingly admitted, were any proof. “Well, if that’s true, my lord, then I’m sorry I hit you with that poker.”

“Och.” Glendenning pulled uncomfortably at his shirt collar. “Didna even leave a bruise.”

Reilly, striving to break the uncomfortable silence that followed this pronouncement, said the first thing that came into his head. “So how is the youngest Mr. MacGregor progressing?”

Pearson made an expressive face. “Far too many unripe berries,” he said, “have taken their usual, and unfortunate, toll on young master Seumas.”

“Will he be all right?” This query came from the patient’s older brother.

“He should be,” Brenna said. “I’ve dosed him with a little opium, mixed with water.”

“Excellent,” Reilly said—although he could not honestly say that he had been listening. All he could sit and wonder about was just what, exactly, was wrong with Brenna. Why was she so anxious not to be alone with him? Had he said something he oughtn’t whilst under the influence of the laudanum? He could not imagine having done so. What, other than the truth, that he loved her to distraction, could he have said?

It seemed entirely more likely that Pearson or Shelley might have said something. He glanced at his two friends as they cheerfully downed Lord Glendenning’s whisky. He had been unconscious for nearly a day. There was no telling what, precisely, they had said to Brenna during that time that might

have led her to adopt this new, strained attitude toward him. Had they, he wondered, said something about the fact that he was a marquis? Lord help him if Brenna had found out from them what he, by rights, ought to have told her long ago. . . .

But he'd had every intention of telling her, in his own way . . . in his own time. If Pearson or Shelley had let even a hint of it slip. . . .

Well, they'd pay for it. That was all.

"So if Lord Glendenning didn't shoot you," Shelley asked in his usual artless manner, picking up the subject that Reilly had purposefully let drop upon Brenna's return to the cottage, "who did?"

"My vote's on that Mackafee fellow," Pearson said amiably. "The one you told us about, Miss Donnegan."

Brenna, over at the sideboard, regarded them with wide eyes. "Harold Mackafee?" she breathed.

"It makes sense, if you think about it," Pearson went on. "From the way you described it, the man certainly has a reason to want Stanton dead."

"But my father knocked Harold Mackafee flat dozens of times," Brenna said, "and he never came after *him* with a rifle."

"Maybe," Pearson offered, "Reilly here was just one knock down too many."

"And maybe," Reilly said tersely, "it wasn't Harold Mackafee at all who did it."

He didn't say it, of course, because he didn't believe Hamish, or even because he could see that the boy was growing uncomfortable at the turn the conversation had taken. No, he said it because Harold Mackafee, and what he'd done, was his own problem, and no one else's . . . at least until he figured out what had best be done about the man.

Rubbing his chin, Reilly looked at Brenna, who was trying, he could see, not to meet his gaze. His skin, beneath his fingers, felt blissfully smooth. He had shaved that morning for the first time since his accident—dressed himself, as well, in what Shelley called his best duds—and had been telling himself that, at last, he could face the world—and Brenna—in a civilized manner.

Only now he wasn't completely certain he wanted to face the world . . . just Brenna, only she didn't seem all that willing to meet him.

He was mulling over the reasons for this so deliberately that he did not, at first, hear the voice from the doorway. It was Brenna's voice, hoarse as ever, that caught his attention as she asked, "What is it, Maeve? Is something wrong?"

He swung around to gaze toward the door. The barmaid stood there, her eyelids red and swollen

from crying. She was panting heavily, as if she'd run all the way from the tavern. "Oh, miss . . . Oh, miss . . ."

She was weeping so hard, she could hardly get the words out. Brenna set the kettle down and went to the girl, and put an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"What is it, Maeve?" she asked. "You can tell me. What's wrong?"

Maeve hiccupped through her sobs. "Oh, miss. . . ." She scissored a glance at Lord Glendenning as she said the next words: "It's Flora, miss. She's . . . she's come down with it, she has."

"Come down with what?" Reilly asked, but no one seemed to hear him. Brenna had taken Maeve by both shoulders, and now she gave the smaller girl a gentle shake, as if trying to rattle some sense into her.

"Come down with what?" Brenna demanded. "Come down with *what*, Maeve?"

Across the room, Lord Glendenning stood up. His chair, as always, fell over backward behind him, but he did not seem to notice. He stared intently down at the trembling barmaid.

"Oh, you *know* with what," Maeve cried, burying her face in her hands. "You *know!* It's the cholera again, miss. I'd stake my life on it. It's the cholera again."



The early morning fog swathed the island, making it impossible to see more than a few feet in front of one's face. Castle Glendenning, high atop its cliff, wasn't visible at all. From where he stood, Reilly could not even see The Tortured Hare, although he knew there were those who were awake there, who were burning lamps to see by.

Despite the early hour, the fishermen had already launched their boats. Most of the gulls had followed them and their nets, but a few remained, swooping hopefully above Reilly and his friends as they stood waiting for the ferry. Their urgent calls were the only sound to be heard, with the exception of the waves. . . .

Until Pearson said testily, "He's late."

It was not cold, but Shelley shivered anyway. "Stupid bleeding sod," was all he had to offer by way of comment.

Reilly, standing with his two friends, listened for the sound of Stuben's tuneless whistling, the only way, on days as gray as this one, that his approach could be determined.

"I don't like it," Pearson declared.

"He's never more than half an hour late," Reilly told him. "Half an hour won't matter. You'll make the post chaise in plenty of time."

"Not *that*," Pearson sounded disgusted. "*You*. You ought to be coming with us."

"Oh." Reilly raised his eyebrows. "You know I can't do that."

"Old bean," Pearson said intensely, "you have a moral obligation to do exactly that. Get that girl and come with us. It's suicide to stay in this godforsaken place."

"She won't go," Reilly said simply.

"Bind and gag her, then," Pearson advised. "Put her in a sack like the hellcat she is if you have to. But get away from here, the both of you."

Reilly couldn't help smiling. He loved both Charles Pearson and St. John Shelley as if they were the brothers he'd never had. But his affection for them did not blind him to their faults . . . like the fact that they could both be selfish as toddlers, and gossipy as schoolgirls.

Which reminded him . . .

"Now you're quite sure neither of you said anything to Brenna," he asked, "about my being Marquis of Stillworth?"

"For the last time," Pearson ground out, "*no*."

"Well, something's bloody bothering her," Reilly muttered. "And if it isn't that, I don't know what it could be."

"P'raps it's the fact that cholera's going around," Shelley suggested lightly. "That does tend to make most people a bit jumpy."

"She's been put out with me since before that." Reilly grew thoughtful. "Since right after I was shot, actually."

"Maybe she's realized," Shelley said, "what a truly rotten patient you make, and wants nothing to do with you anymore. Wouldn't blame her in the least. I never heard so much grouching in all my born ___"

"You're going about this all wrong, Stillworth," Pearson interrupted irritably. "You ought to tell her you're nobility. It'll impress her."

"Not her," Reilly said emphatically.

"Nonsense." Pearson drew out his watch and squinted at it in the grey morning light. "We all thought Miss King—or Lady Ethelridge, I mean—cared more for character than for currency, and look how wrong we were about that. Why, even your Miss Donnegan said . . ."

Pearson's voice trailed off.

Reilly, his eyebrows raised expectantly, said, "Even my Miss Donnegan said what?"

Pearson snapped his pocket watch closed and slipped it back into his waiscoat. "Oh," he said, "nothing."

But his mouth, beneath his neat mustache, had grown decidedly pinched.

"*Miss Donnegan said what, Charles?*" Reilly demanded, in a harder voice.

Shelley chimed in with, "Oh, do you mean when we were talking about Miss King?"

“Talking about Miss King?” Reilly thundered. “With *Brenna*? When was this?”

Shelley jumped, but more from the elbow Pearson thrust into his ribs than from Reilly’s outburst.

“Ow,” he said, massaging the spot his friend had bruised. “What’s the matter with you, Chas? Reilly, I assure you, it was all perfectly innocent. It was while you were sleeping off the laudanum. We were talkin’ about it—Chas and I, about how well you took the news, you know, about Ethelridge, and all of that—when she sort of . . . well, appeared.”

Pearson, looking pained, said, “We didn’t realize she was awake, let alone in the room.”

Reilly looked from one man to the other. “And then?”

“And then she asked if we meant Miss Christine King,” Shelley said, “and we said yes, and your Miss Donnegal said obviously a viscount’s a better catch than a physician, and we agreed.” His eyes widened at Pearson’s accusing look. “Well,” he said. “We did. It’s not as if we pointed out to her that a marquis is better than either of them, which we very well could have.”

Pearson sighed. “Reilly,” he said. “Honestly, it—”

“No.” Reilly held up a hand for silence. “Let me think.”

He thought. So Brenna knew Christine had married another. Could that be it, then? The reason for the distance, the frosty looks? But *why*? What possible difference could the fact that Christine King had married the Viscount of Ethelridge make to Brenna Donnegal?

“I say, Chas,” Shelley cried, as if something had just occurred to him. “You don’t suppose it has anything to with how I told her we’d come for the old bean, do you?”

“Told her you’d come for me?” Reilly’s voice cracked. “You *told* her that? You told her that’s why you’d come to Skye? To fetch me home?”

“Well, of course,” Shelley said, looking surprised at the question. “It isn’t as if she couldn’t have figured that out for herself. Put two and two together and all. Miss King was the reason you were here, after all. Then Miss King got married. Not much point in staying after that, now, was there?”

Reilly felt as if the ground beneath him had moved. Since he was standing on the pier, and not on soil, this was not so unusual. No wave, however, had caused the shudder he’d felt through his body.

“You told her you’d come to fetch me,” he said, in carefully measured tones. “Did you happen to mention that I refused your kind offer?”

He did not miss the quick, guilty look his two friends—former friends—exchanged.

“Well, obviously you refused, old bean,” Shelley said, with a nervous laugh. “You’re here seeing us off, not coming with us, aren’t you? I mean, she’s surely figured it out by now.”

“So she has no idea,” Reilly said, in the same measured tone. “No idea that I said—”

“She wasn’t bothered by it, Reilly,” Shelley insisted. “She even joked about it. Remember, Chas? The bit about a viscount a day keeps the doctor away. . . .”

Pearson said, severely, “For God’s sake, Stanton. You told us to keep your title a secret. We did that. You can’t—”

Fortunately, Stuben’s whistling became audible at that point. Reilly said testily, “Well, there here he is at last. If you don’t mind, I shan’t wait any longer with you chaps. I’ve some cleaning up to do, I see.”

“Now, Reilly,” Pearson began.

But Reilly cut him off.

“You could make it up to me,” he said, “by staying and lending us a hand.”

Shelley said lightly, “No, thank you. I’d prefer to let you be angry with me for the rest of my days than have those days cut short by an unpleasant bout of cholera.”

Reilly regarded them both stonily. “Perhaps the two of you might recall something we talked about back in school,” he said. “I believe it was called the Hippocratic oath—”

“Don’t give me that bloody oath business.” Pearson was so angry—or fearful—his face had drained of most of its color, so that his dark mustache stood out from his upper lip like a wound. “It’s madness to stay here. Madness. These people are all going to die anyway, whether you stay or not. Get the girl and *come with us*.”

Reilly laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Can’t do it, old chap,” he said. “I’m needed elsewhere. But have a pleasant trip back, and don’t forget to deliver those orders of mine. We’ll need supplies, and plenty of them.”

Pearson patted his waistcoat pocket distractedly. His gaze was on the shifting fog as he tried to catch a glimpse of the boat that would deliver both him and Shelley from this sudden hell they’d found themselves in. “It wasn’t, you know,” he said obliquely.

Reilly raised his eyebrows questioningly.

“Folly,” Pearson explained. “Your getting your medical license. It wasn’t foolish. You actually care. I believe you actually care about these people, don’t you?”

Reilly managed a grim smile. “Yes, I suppose I do.”

“If you both live through this, invite us to the wedding, will you? We’ll come.”

Reilly smiled and left them standing on the pier, waiting for Stuben to make his appearance through the fog. He did not stay to see them off because he had far too many other things to do.

The first was to stop by The Tortured Hare and see if he could rectify what his friends had wrought.

Easier said than done, however. Brenna was in no mood to discuss anything but her patient.

“Well, she lived through the night,” a tired Brenna informed him, just outside the door to Flora’s closet-sized, whitewashed bedroom. “That’s something, anyway, ill as she is.”

Reilly peered in at the figure—already wasted, after only twenty-four hours of the fever that was raging through her. This was not the deceptively fragile-looking Flora who had sat, minutes before she’d given birth—to a breech baby, no less—flipping through ladies’ journals and chatting about the latest Parisian fashions. This Flora lay insensible, her golden curls spread out across the pillows, her skin pale as death. There was a distinctive odor about the room, though Reilly was only just learning what that odor was: it was the scent of cholera.

The scent of death.

Beside Flora’s little bed stood a milking bench covered with pitchers of liquid. Cholera induced in its victims a burning thirst. Opinions amongst Reilly’s colleagues varied on just which liquid was best to give a cholera victim. Reilly himself had often jokingly observed that the best beverage to offer a cholera patient was whatever the poor soul wanted, as it was likely to be his last.

He did not find that particular joke amusing at the moment.

Brenna, he soon learned, followed her father’s advice in favoring water laced with opium for her patients—though Mrs. Murphy’s ale served in a pinch, when opium ran low. Since, Reilly had learned, Dr. Donnegal’s patients had a recovery rate of nearly double that in neighboring villages, he supposed Brenna’s father might have been on to something. In any case, it was opium and water Brenna had been ladling down Flora’s throat all night, and the girl was not dead . . . yet.

But it would be no good, Reilly thought, telling that to the man who slumped a few feet away from the bed. Lord Glendenning looked more absurdly large than ever as he sprawled in the spindly chair at the foot of the girl’s bed. He, like Brenna, had been there all night. Nor would he stir, Reilly was certain, from that chair all morning. Not until Flora was recovered—or dead—would the earl leave her side. It was a touching, if somewhat belated tribute to the mother of his four daughters. Reilly felt it was a shame Flora was not conscious to enjoy it.

Brenna, following his gaze, gave a tired smile.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s sleeping now. Thank God. I thought I should go mad if I had to listen to one

more testament as to how much he's always loved Flora."

Reilly raised his eyebrows. "Really? How convenient for him, now that you're taken."

She did not, as he'd expected her to, smile—not even slightly—upon hearing this. Instead, she asked, "Your friends caught the ferry?"

"They will. Listen, Brenna. About my friends. I understand that they—"

"Did you look in on Seumas MacGregor?" Brenna interrupted him.

"Seumas MacGregor?" He nodded. "Oh, yes. No, you were right. It wasn't the blueberries after all. He has it, too."

"Oh, God." Brenna lifted a hand to her forehead. "I ought to have known. Only it's still so early in the summer, I never expected—"

"MacAdams's wife has it, as well. And one of the Abercrombie girls. I've had her moved to the dispensary. She's not doing at all well—" Reilly noticed that Brenna, upon hearing this, had gone even paler. He wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"Why don't you go back to the cottage and try to get some sleep?" he suggested gently. Explanations—and recriminations—could wait. Now there were more important things to worry about. "I'll wake Glendenning—he can shovel opium down Flora's throat as well as you can. Then I'll make the rounds, see to the MacGregor boy and Mrs. MacAdams. . . ."

"No." Brenna shook her head quickly. "No, there's no time for sleep."

She was not, he realized, playing the martyr. Not at all. Tired as she was, there was something driving her, something that, when tested like this, rose to the occasion, excited about the challenge ahead. She could not have slept if she'd tried. Her desire to beat this thing was like a flame burning behind those sapphire eyes.

He saw that flame and thought he understood it. It was what had brought her back to Skye, risking her reputation and her family's disapproval. None of that, he realized, mattered to her. Not even he mattered to her . . . not at this moment. At this moment, she was nothing but an edgy, burning bundle of compulsive energy.

"The MacAdamses, did you say?" She was lifting something—it was, he realized, his journal. For a moment, he thought she was going to begin berating him once again about his lack of poetic tribute to her.

Then he realized his journal wasn't a journal anymore. She had appropriated it, and now was filling it up with her illegible markings—a portable version of the charts she had in her study back at the cottage.

She scribbled furiously. “The MacGregors,” she breathed. “The MacAdamses. Flora. The Abercrombies. Yes, it’s just like before. Only . . . only I still can’t tell where it originated.”

Reilly said, “Well, with the MacGregor boy, of course.”

“Yes, but how did he get it? Why was he first?” Brenna stared down at the sketch she had made. It was, Reilly saw, a crude map of the local area. By marking each of the places where families of the victims lived, he saw that she had drawn a star shape.

“The MacGregors live fairly far from the village—almost as far out as the Mackafees. The Abercrombies are just inside the village limits, and the MacAdamses, and Flora, live right here in Lyming proper. But just like before, no one from the castle has been stricken. None of the Marshalls, nor you or I.”

Reilly nodded. Mrs. Murphy, he saw, was approaching them, a nervous expression on her face. Well, and why shouldn’t she be nervous? Flora’s illness might, at any time, strike any of them in the same seemingly haphazard way it struck its other victims. . . .

“Dr. Stanton,” the tavern’s proprietress said, when she’d come near enough to speak without having to raise her voice and wake the fitfully dozing earl. “Miss Brenna. There’s a wee one at the door downstairs . . . says she needs you both.”

Brenna closed her book with a snap.

“Mrs. Murphy,” she said with brisk authority. “Be so good as to sit with Flora for a moment. See if you can wake her, and make her drink something. As much as she’ll take.”

Then Brenna had him by the arm and was propelling him down the stairs.

“It seems as if the highest concentration of victims are in town,” she was saying, as they made their way past the bar and toward the tavern’s front door. “Which corresponds with what we know about the disease. The deaths from cholera are much higher in London and other crowded cities—particularly the ones by ports. . . .”

“Which,” Reilly said carefully, “lends itself toward the miasma theory. Putrifaction—”

Brenna dismissed this with a curt, “I think not. As I thought I made clear to you, there is no sign of any such putrifaction near any of the homes of the victims.”

“Brenna, a good many men have written a good many treatises—”

“Then a good many men,” she interrupted, “were wrong.”

With that, Brenna had flung open the door, and stood staring down at the small child huddled on the step outside.

The child turned at the sound of the door opening, then stood up slowly. It was, despite the dirt coating its face, unmistakably Shannon Mackafee. Her eyes were huge and red rimmed.

“Shannon.” Brenna dropped at once to her knees. “Are you all right?”

The little girl nodded. She seemed, for the moment, incapable of speech.

“Is it your mother, Shannon?” Brenna swept some of the child’s raggedy hair from her face.

The little girl shook her head.

“Your sisters or brothers? They’re all right?”

The little girl nodded. Then, with a darting, nervous look at Reilly, she whispered, “It’s . . . it’s my pa.”

“Your father?” Brenna’s eyebrows constricted with concern. “What’s the matter with him?”

“Took real bad right here a few days back,” Shannon explained, pointing to her stomach. “Now he’s thirsty all the time, and Ma says he’s burning up, and to fetch you and the doctor straightaway. . . .”

A slow smile spread across Reilly’s face. He couldn’t stop it, anymore than he’d have been able to stop the sun from shining.

“Is that so?” he asked, in a tone of voice that caused Brenna to glance up at him sharply. . . .

But when she did all she saw was a man looking thoughtfully off into the fog.



The hovel where the Mackafees lived was even worse than he remembered. Perhaps that was because now the stench of cholera hung heavy over it.

The rains from the day he'd first visited the place, coupled with melting snow from the mountaintops above it, had widened the narrow strip of water that trickled through the center of the Mackafees' plot of land. The edges of the shallow stream now reached almost to the door of their sorry excuse for a cottage. Reilly had offered a gentlemanly hand to Brenna, in order to help her across it, but she had eschewed this nicety, stomping flatly through the water in her boots.

She had lost a good deal of her pluck, however, in the face of the misery and squalor that lay across that water.

"Please, Mr. Mackafee," Brenna pleaded with her newest patient, who lay in a ragged bed in one corner of the fetid shack his children called home. "The whisky's only making you thirstier. Won't you try a little of this?"

She held up a bottle full of the opium-and-water concoction she had mixed up before they'd left the tavern.

Mackafee, looking a good deal older and more gaunt than he had when Reilly had taken such delight in plunging his fist into his mouth, shook his mostly toothless head.

"Whisky," he said, in wheezing tones.

Brenna, sitting perched on the very edge of the bed—there was only one chair, and Mrs. Mackafee, looking more than a little gaunt herself, was in it—unstopped the bottle.

"Really, Mr. Mackafee," Brenna said. "Just try it. I think you'll feel better for it."

But Mackafee, with a strength surprising in so very ill a man, smacked the bottle, and sent it flying across the hovel—and most of its contents flying all over Brenna.

"I dunna want it," he cried, in strident tones. "Do you hear me, wench? I dunna want it, nor your doctorin'. Get away. Just get away!"

Brenna, clearly distressed, had sprung to her feet. It was quite an easy thing, after that, for Reilly to steer her away from the bed.

“Why don’t you,” he suggested kindly, “examine the children and see how they’re faring, and I’ll see to Mr. Mackafee.”

“Yes,” Brenna said in a dazed voice. “Perhaps that would be best.”

As soon as she was out of earshot, Reilly took her place on the edge of Mackafee’s foul bed, and grinned down at the invalid.

“Hullo, there,” he said in a friendly manner. “Remember me?”

Mackafee’s rheumy eyes widened. It was clear that he did, indeed, remember Reilly.

“*You*,” he breathed, from between cracked lips.

“Yes, that’s right,” Reilly said cheerfully. “It’s me. Surprise! Thought you’d killed me, did you? Well, sorry to disappoint you. We Stantons don’t kill that easily, you know.”

Mackafee twisted his head about the flat pillow beneath it.

“ ’Twasna me,” Mackafee cried, his voice a piteous whine. “I dunna know what you’re—”

“Oh, it was you, all right. You said you were going to make me sorry for what I’d done to you, and at your first opportunity, you did.” Reilly smiled down at him some more. “But you see, you made a rather bad mistake. You didn’t actually kill me. No, you left me alive. And that wasn’t smart.”

Mackafee’s fear was palpable now. Reilly could almost smell it, the way he could smell the cholera, as if it were being pumped from the pores of the man’s skin.

“W-what are you going to do?” Mackafee wanted to know. “Turn the law on me? That’s no’ the Skye way, you know. Here on Skye, men work out their troubles for themselves. They dunna turn to the law. . . .”

“The law? Good God, no. What would the law do? If you live through this illness of yours, they’ll only lock you up. And then you’ll be able to continue your layabout ways, while your poor wife, unable to remarry, starves. No, I have a much worse punishment in mind for you than the law could ever dole out.”

Mackafee licked his dry, chapped lips. “W-what punishment is that?”

“Oh, only this.” Reilly produced another bottle of Brenna’s opium elixir from his coat pocket. “See this bottle? You’re going to drink it. All of it.”

Mackafee’s eyes widened. “But—”

“I don’t care how much you retch. And when you’ve finished everything in this bottle,” Reilly said, “you’re going to drink the next one I send up. You’re going to do everything Miss Brenna says, and above all, Mackafee, you are not going to die.” There was nothing light or pleasant about Reilly’s tone now. He wasn’t smiling. In fact, his face had taken on an expression that was causing Harold Mackafee to shake in his bed—and his quivering limbs had nothing to do with the contagion raging through him.

“No,” Reilly went on, in the same coldly quiet tone, “you’re going to live, Mackafee. And do you want to know why? Because Miss Brenna wants it that way. You see, she can’t see what I see when I look at you, which is a filthy waste of humanity. She wants you to live, so you can redeem yourself by giving up the whisky and becoming the kind of husband and father your wife and children deserve. And what that means, Mackafee, is that you are going to do every solitary thing Miss Brenna says. You are going to get well.”

Mackafee eyed him anxiously. “I am?”

“Oh, yes. You are. You are going to get well, and you are going to give up the whisky, and build your family a decent house, and start bathing and going to church—”

Despite his fear, Mackafee’s lip began to curl up. “You canna—”

“Oh, can’t I?” Reilly stared down at him. “Believe me, Harold, I can. And I will.”

“No’ if—” Mackafee played the one card he still held. “—I die.”

“Harold,” Reilly said in a chiding tone. “Do you think I would ever let you die? Why, never!”

Mackafee glared at him. “You canna stop me.”

“But of course I can. You heard how I stopped the MacGregor boy from dying, didn’t you? I drilled a hole through his skull.” Reilly smiled pleasantly down at the sick man. “Right through his cranium, down into his brain. Very unpleasant, that was. But you know, that isn’t my only trick. For instance, if you suddenly up and stopped eating and drinking, Harold, do you know what I would do?”

Mackafee’s glare had turned from defiant to trepidation. “What, then?” he asked, looking instantly as if he wished he hadn’t.

“Why, I’d take my knife,” Reilly said, “and drill a hole right there—” He touched Mackafee’s throat lightly, just at the curve of his collarbone. “Then, you see, I’d insert a hollow stick there, and pour food into it. Of course—” Reilly smiled down at him regretfully. “—you wouldn’t be able to talk anymore, so we wouldn’t be able to ask you what you’d like to eat, but since the only thing that could really go down that tube without choking you is mash, I don’t suppose it matters very much. Once I’d made the incision, of course, and put the tube in, we’d never be able to take it out . . . you’d starve to death before the wound healed enough to let you swallow normally again. So you see, your

whisky days are over, my friend, either way.”

Reilly looked down at the invalid, wondering if he’d believe the outlandish tale he’d just spun, or if he’d have to resort to another, even more revolting one.

Mackafee, staring up at him unblinkingly, said, “I—I’ll drink what’s in the bottle.”

“Good man,” Reilly said, giving the patient a pat on the shoulder. “I thought you would.”

“I—I’ll do what Miss Brenna says.”

“Oh, yes,” Reilly said. “You will.”

“I—I’m sorry I tried to kill you. I—I didna mean it. It was the whisky. I was out of my head.”

“Of course you were. But you won’t have that problem any more. Open,” he commanded, and Mackafee did so. Reilly poured a goodly portion of the contents of the bottle down his throat.

And Mackafee swallowed and managed a queasy smile at Brenna, who hesitantly approached the bed just then.

“There, you see,” Reilly said, in a completely different tone. Now he sounded friendly and kind. “Miss Brenna’s medicine is really quite restorative, isn’t it, Mr. Mackafee?”

Mackafee nodded, his gaze on Brenna.

“See, Brenna?” Reilly smiled fondly down at his patient. “He likes it.”

“It’s quite good,” Harold Mackafee said, with a gummy grin.

“I don’t believe it,” Brenna murmured twenty minutes later, when they were through dismantling Mackafee’s still.

“Oh, it’s all quite above board,” Reilly assured her. “Mackafee asked me to do it. ‘Please tear down my still,’ he said to me. You should have heard him. Quite penitent he was.”

“He’s had this still for twenty years,” Brenna said.

“Yes, well, a man knows when it’s time to make a change. Life-threatening diseases can do that to people. Well, you should know. I’m sure you’ve seen similar changes of heart in your father’s patients.”

“Never quite this severe,” Brenna said. “Why, he’d drunk almost the entire contents of that bottle by the time we’d left, Reilly. I’ll need to send up another before sundown.”

“Well, when a man decides he’s going to change his life, he generally likes to start right away.” Reilly, grinding one last bit of glass beneath his foot, brushed off his hands and looked up to find Brenna gazing at him intently.

“You threatened him, didn’t you?” she asked—not in any sort of accusing way, but with definitely pointed interest.

“I did no such thing,” Reilly sputtered, indignantly. “How dare you—”

“Nonsense.” Brenna was all that was businesslike. She reminded him of a schoolmistress. “You threatened him, and that’s why he drank the opium. But what could you possibly have threatened him *with*? The man is at death’s door.”

Reilly shrugged, and too late remembered the wound he had courtesy of the very man whom Brenna was so keen to discuss. It throbbed every time he tried to lift his arm.

“I don’t remember what I said,” Reilly replied, half truthfully. “Does it really matter? Whatever it was, it worked.”

Brenna, clearly impressed, said, “I suppose. Only I’d liked to know, for future reference. In case I ever run into that sort of thing again, I mean.”

Which reminded him.

“Brenna,” he began. “About what those friends of mine—well, if you can call them friends—might have said to you while I was—”

“Hullo.” Brenna cut him off. “What have we here?”

If he hadn’t known better, he might have thought she was purposefully avoiding this very necessary discussion. But then he found that she was staring, with pointed interest, at young Dorcas Mackafee, who had left the hovel and was, with some disgust, slapping what appeared to be a dirty rag into the stream just outside a few yards from them.

“Dorcas.” Brenna strolled up to the child. “What are you doing?”

“Baby’s dirty nappies,” came the barely intelligible reply.

“Oh.” Brenna watched as the girl halfheartedly dipped the cloth in and out of the water.

“I say,” Reilly said, a disgusting thought popping into his head. “Is this the same stream you draw water for the table from, my dear?”

The child clearly did not understand a word he’d said. She squinted up at him—the sun had finally put in an appearance—and said, “Pardon?”

“Do you drink from this same stream, Dorcas?” Brenna translated.

“Aye,” Dorcas said. “ ’Course.” She went back to her washing.

Reilly heaved a shudder of revulsion. “Come, Brenna,” he said, seizing her arm. “Let’s go before I’m sick.”

Brenna, however, laid a hand upon his chest. Since this was the most intimate manner in which she’d touched him for days, Reilly froze, and looked down at her hopefully.

Only her gaze was on the child at their feet.

“Dorcas,” Brenna said. “Your mother told me the baby had been sick. She said the baby had the same sickness as your papa, only not so bad. Do you know how long ago that was? Because she couldn’t remember. Do you think it was before Dr. Stanton and I came out here the last time?”

Dorcas nodded. “Aye,” she said. “That’s why Pa hit Mam. Because the baby was cryin’ too much, and it kepted him awake nights.”

Brenna said nothing in reply. She only stood gazing down at the brown, fetid-looking water.

Reilly, standing beside her, said, “Um, don’t you think we’d better get back? We’ve other patients, you know—”

“The MacGregors draw their drinking water from the stream this rivulet flows into,” Brenna said, almost as if to herself.

“Ugh,” Reilly said. “Well, we’ll have to pay a little call on them on our way back, and warn them about Baby Mackafee’s nappies. . . .”

Suddenly, Brenna was reaching into her pocket. She drew out Reilly’s journal and turned to the page where she’d drawn the map of Lyming.

“The stream this rivulet flows into,” she said, taking out a pencil and tracing the approximate position of the stream next to the marking that indicated the Mackafees’ place, “flows past the MacGregors’s, where one of their children is sick right now. Two of them died last summer.”

“Hamish’s family?” Reilly frowned. “I’d no idea.”

“Then—” Brenna continued to draw. “—it flows past the Campbells. Four dead last summer. Then past the Abercrombies—”

“One of their girls is down with it,” Reilly said. Suddenly, Brenna’s excitement—with which she was fairly quivering—seemed to pass through him, as well. He watched her pencil move, transfixed.

“Then it flows into an underground spring.” Brenna drew a square. “Over which there is a pump.

From which the MacAdamses draw their water.” She drew a line radiating from the square. “The Tortured Hare draws its water from the same pump.” Another line. “In fact . . . the entire village of Lyming draws its water from that pump.” The pencil leapt across the page, until it landed on a completely separate wavy line.

“Except,” Brenna said, in tones of breathless exhilaration, “for Burn Cottage. We draw our water from the burn. No cholera reported from Burn Cottage this summer so far, nor last summer, nor any summer that I can remember.”

Reilly hardly had time to appreciate the “we” before the pencil leapt again.

“And the Marshalls.” She drew a line radiating from the burn to the church. “No cholera at the Marshalls’s, who draw their drinking water from the burn.”

Then the pencil tip dragged all the way to the southern-most tip of the page.

“Castle Glendenning,” Brenna said. “No reported cases of cholera, ever. Castle Glendenning draws its water from the same source as the burn.”

Reilly gazed down at the completely confusing tangle of lines on the page. He thought he understood. Only . . .

Only it was impossible.

“What precisely are you saying, Brenna?” he asked, carefully.

“You know what I’m saying, Reilly,” she said. She stabbed the pencil tip at the square in the center of the page, the square from which so many lines radiated. She used such force, the pencil tip snapped off.

“It’s the water,” she said.



She couldn't believe it. It had been there, all along, staring her in the face—staring her father in the face—and yet neither of them had ever seen it. Never *would* have seen it if a small child, washing a pair of dirty diapers, hadn't spelled it out, in all its lurid detail.

Water. Cholera was a water-borne contagion.

Why hadn't she realized it before? All those people—all those names on those grave markers. They'd all come from families who drew their drinking water from the village pump or the stream that ran into it.

That was the pattern. *That* was what connected all the victims. . . .

And as such, was controllable. The burn, and the fact that no one who drank from it had ever come down with a case of the disease, proved it. No, the infection was only spread when people drank the vile, dirty water that ran down from the Mackafees' shack. In London, and other cities where the contagion ran rampant, it would be the same: people doing their washing—or worse—in the same water that they, and anyone downstream of them, drank.

It had been so obvious. Why had no one figured it out before? Miasmas had always been to blame, gaseous substances thought to form over swamps or areas of putrid waste. . . .

But as her careful examination of the topography of the area had proved, there was no such swamp or waste deposit in Lyming. . . . No mysterious vapor caused this illness's spread. It was caused by one simple thing: ignorance. Poverty and ignorance. A combination which had caused, Brenna thought to herself as she urged Willow to an even faster gallop, more than a few ills in the world.

And because of it, tens of thousands were dying every year.

Well, not anymore. There might not be a cure—yet—but she could certainly stop the spread. Maybe not across the world, but in her world . . . in Lyming, anyway.

Brenna glanced over her shoulder. Reilly was behind her on his own horse, but due to his wounded shoulder, could not keep up with her breakneck speed. Reilly. Brenna turned forward in her saddle again. What was she going to do about Reilly?

Because of course she knew.

Well, she couldn't think about that. Not just yet. Not when she had so much else to do.

It wasn't until Willow thundered into the village proper that Brenna slowed her mount. The mare reared indignantly—she'd enjoyed her run and was unwilling to have it end. But Brenna hardly noticed this discourteous behavior. She slid from the mare's back, then hurried toward the blacksmith's shop.

“Pardon me, Mr. Cameron,” she said breathlessly. “But might I trouble you for a wrench?”

The blacksmith, who'd been enjoying his lunch—what appeared to be a thick fish stew—looked up at her curiously.

“Help yourself, Miss Brenna,” he said.

Brenna picked through the smithy's collection of wrenches until she'd found one just the right size and weight for her requirements. Then, hefting the massive thing, she smiled her thanks at Mr. Cameron, then headed toward the object of her very intense attention. . . .

The village pump.

No one was about. Flora and Mrs. MacAdams's illness had put an end to the gathering of stalls in the village square. Everyone who was not out working for a living, either at sea or in the fields, was hiding at home, trying their best not to breathe the miasmic gases thought to be wafting through the town.

None of them, Brenna knew, suspected that what was making them sick was the water they drank and bathed in.

But she would soon put a stop to that.

The pump was a fairly new one. Before it, there had been a well. The villagers were understandably proud of the new innovation which had made their water-bearing tasks that much easier. They would not, Brenna knew, be at all thrilled with what she was about to do next.

But there was no other way, she knew, to stop the scourge.

Kneeling down beside the brightly painted pump handle, she applied the wrench to the bolts that held it into place.

“Brenna! Wait!”

She looked up. Reilly Stanton and his mount came trotting into the square. He pulled—gingerly, thanks to his shoulder—on the reins, then sat in the saddle, staring at her.

“What is it?” she asked. Was he, she wondered, going to try to stop her? Didn’t he know this was the only way?

But all he said was, “They’ll give you a bit of trouble at first. Why don’t you let me have first go at them?”

She rose, and when he’d dismounted and come close enough, offered him the wrench the way a queen offered a newly christened knight his blade.

“Be my guest, doctor,” she said.

He had a little trouble, what with his sore shoulder, and the fact that the bolts had rusted a bit in the sea air. Finally he got one to budge, and Brenna managed to turn it the rest of the way. They had completely removed one bolt when little Jessie Murdoch approached, holding the drinking pail from the village schoolhouse.

“What are you doing?” the child asked without preamble.

Reilly, struggling to budge the second bolt, said nothing. He was panting too hard for speech. But Brenna replied, “We’re dismantling the pump, Jessie. You’ll have to go to the burn for water, I’m afraid.”

The little girl’s eyes widened. “The *burn*? But *why*?”

“The water from this pump is bad.” Brenna nodded in Reilly’s direction. “Dr. Stanton and I don’t want people drinking from it anymore. Everyone is going to have to get their water from the burn for a while.”

Again, the child’s eyes went round. “But the burn is so *far*. . . .”

“I know.” Brenna smiled down at the little girl. “And I’m sorry. But that’s just the way it’s going to have to be.”

Jessie looked down at the pail in her hand. “I s’pose I’d better tell Mr. Rupert.”

“I think you’d better,” Brenna said gravely, and the child scooted off to do just that.

Reilly, resting from his exertions, said, “They aren’t going to like it. Fetching their water from the burn, I mean.”

“Of course they aren’t going to like it.” Brenna nudged him aside, and took hold of the wrench handle herself. “But—” She pulled. “—what choice do they have? It’s a long walk or death. I think they’ll choose the walk.”

The bolt did not budge, not even infinitesimally. Reilly, looking as if he’d gotten some of the feeling back in his fingers, added his hands to hers. Pulling together, their combined weight finally

caused the bolt to give. After that, it was merely a matter of untwisting it, like the other.

They were doing this when Mr. Rupert, the schoolmaster, approached.

“Pardon me,” he said, diffidently. He was a very strict teacher, Brenna knew, but in life a very diffident man. He sidled up to them as reluctantly as if he suspected they might snap at him like dogs protecting their territory.

“Yes, Mr. Rupert?” Brenna straightened and wiped her rust-and-paint encrusted fingers on her trousers.

“Jessie told me you’re taking the pump apart. She says you told her there’s something wrong with the water.”

“Yes,” Brenna said. “The water from this pump is spreading the cholera. You must tell the children not to drink any water but what comes out of the burn. This water has been infected.”

Mr. Rupert adjusted his spectacles. “Good Lord,” he said. “Are you certain? I thought—”

Brenna said, flatly, “I’m certain.”

“I see.” Mr. Rupert nodded. “Yes, well, I see. Very interesting. I will tell the children straightaway. The burn, you say, is safe?”

“For now,” Brenna said. She then went on to explain that all washing must be done in an area removed from the burn, which would only remain safe to drink so long as it remained uncontaminated by human waste. Mr. Rupert, a determined bachelor with extremely old-fashioned ideas about women, blushed profusely from hearing such words fall from the lips of a female. Nevertheless, he had known Brenna for most of her life and knew that she meant what she said.

“I’ll tell them,” he assured her, though he had gone noticeably pale. “I—oh, dear. Yes, I’ll tell them. I—oh, dear.”

The Reverend, however, when he approached them, having just come from the homes of the stricken, over whom he’d been praying, was not quite so sanguine about the removal of the pump handle.

“Spread through water?” he cried. “Don’t be absurd. Everyone knows—”

“—cholera is spread through miasmas.” Brenna finished his sentence for him in the same manner his wife always did. Only then she offered up an opinion of her own, something Mrs. Marshall was not normally prone to. “Only it isn’t,” she said. “And the fact that only the people who regularly drink from this water are the ones who are getting sick proves it.”

Mr. Marshall glared down at her. “What I was *going* to say,” he announced, “before I was so

rudely interrupted, is that everyone knows cholera is a punishment from God. It isn't a mystery that the first to be stricken with it was that slatternly wench from the tavern—"

Brenna took a threatening step forward, but then felt Reilly lay a restraining hand on her shoulder.

"Reverend Marshall," he said, insinuating himself between Brenna and the minister. "We do appreciate the ecumenical view on things—honestly, we do. But as the acting physician in this village, I'm afraid I have to make my decisions based on scientific, and not spiritual, fact. And right now, the scientific facts are telling me that this water is dangerous to your parishioners, and Miss Donnegan and I are insuring that no one else gets sick from it."

As he'd been speaking, Reilly had lain a friendly arm about the minister's shoulders, and had been steering him slyly away from the area in which he and Brenna worked. Now he gave the Reverend a hearty pat on the back, and added, "Now be a good fellow, will you, sir, and tell everyone at the sermon next Sunday to get their drinking water from the burn—and for God's sake, not to do their washing in it."

With a wink, Reilly left the minister, and returned to Brenna's side.

Bending over the pump handle, he whispered, "What's he doing?"

Brenna glanced over her shoulder. "He's staring at us as if we'd both just escaped from Bedlam."

"Poor old sod. One more twist here, Brenna, and I think I'll have the thing—" The pump handle, with a groan, came away from the metal frame that had been holding it. Reilly staggered back a step. "Good Lord," he said. "There it is."

Brenna took it from him. "Excellent. Thank you. Now what we need is a sign."

Reilly nodded. "I know just the thing. 'This pump closed by order of Dr. Reilly Stanton, village physician, in order to prevent further spread of cholera.' "

Brenna, impressed, said, "That sounds very official."

Reilly brushed his hands off upon his coat. "Yes," he said. "I can be quite official when I want to. And then what?"

"We'll need other signs to post along the stream that runs into the pump, telling people not to drink from it. And for the people who can't read . . . and there are a lot of them, Reilly . . . we'll need to start going door to door, I'm afraid." She looked down at the pump handle in her hands. "This is really only half the battle, right here."

"But a battle," Reilly pointed out, "well worth fighting."

She lifted her gaze to look at him. He had a smudge of grease from the pump's works on his

cheekbone, and the bandages over his injured shoulder gave him a bit of the appearance of a hunchback, his shoulders looked so uneven.

Yet he was, without a doubt, the handsomest man she had ever seen. The sun brought out the fine threads of gold in his otherwise dark, unruly hair, and played across his sculpted cheekbones and chin. His eyes, a rich chocolate brown, had more intelligence and humor in them than she had ever seen in any other pair of eyes in her life. . . .

She lowered her gaze, feeling, in spite of the rush of emotion she'd experienced earlier, deeply saddened.

“Yes,” she said, softly. “It’s a battle worth fighting.”



But it was not a battle that was won so very easily.

The villagers were not happy to find the water source that they had known all of their lives so suddenly and inexplicably unavailable to them. No matter how many times Brenna and Reilly explained to them that the water flowing from the village pump was contaminated, and reminded them of the many lives that had been lost in last summer's cholera wave, which had run its course, unchecked, they continued to complain. Phrases like, "I've been drinking that water every day since I was born, and I've never been sick in my life," and "And if the water is what's causing the cholera, how come Una Murdoch came down with it *after* the handle was taken away?"

Brenna tried to explain that not everyone was as susceptible to contagion as others were, and that Mrs. Murdoch had been infected *before* she'd removed the handle—she simply hadn't succumbed to the symptoms until afterward. Brenna knew that, in a few days, when no new cases developed, the villagers would be forced to admit she'd been in the right. But in the meantime . . .

In the meantime, she and Dr. Reilly Stanton were not the most popular people in Lyming.

Which suited her just fine. She had her patients to care for and hadn't time for any sort of socializing, anyway. Foremost in her worries was Flora, who was still gravely ill, and showed no signs of improvement. The girl had grown so frail, Brenna expected to hear that horrifying but all too familiar death rattle in her chest at any moment.

The worst was that Lord Glendenning had begun to suspect that Brenna held out little hope for this particular patient. He had not stirred from Flora's room, except to perform what menial tasks Brenna assigned him by way of caring for Flora . . . helping change the sheets beneath the girl, and spooning more of the opium mixture into her. He no longer slept, but sat up, a hollow-eyed mockery of his former self, staring down at the dying girl, asking Brenna, over and over again, if there wasn't anything else they could be doing. At one point, in desperation, Brenna had informed him that if he wanted to help, he could talk to the next troupe of villagers who banged on the door to The Tortured Hare, demanding Brenna return their pump handle. Flora wouldn't have gotten sick, she told him, if it hadn't been for the contaminated water from that pump. It was her hope that if the villagers heard it from Lord Glendenning, they might finally believe it. Despite his philandering ways, the earl was well-respected in the community.

But in order for Lord Glendenning to speak to the villagers, he would have to leave Flora's bedside. And that he resolutely refused to do.

Brenna took to remaining there herself. It was simpler than coming to and from Burn Cottage every few hours. Other patients—Seumas MacGregor, Mrs. MacAdams—had begun to show signs of improvement and no longer needed round-the-clock nursing. Reilly tended to the few remaining patients, Mrs. Murdoch, and his particular favorite, Harold Mackafee. Flora was, so far, their only failure.

But Brenna would not give up on the girl. She ladled liquids down the unconscious barmaid's throat and bathed her forehead. It was a miracle, Brenna knew, that Flora had lived this long. If she could just make it through one more night. . . .

It was small wonder, then, that when Lord Glendenning shook Brenna awake from the light doze into which she'd slipped, she expected to hear the worst.

Lord Glendenning, who had not shaved or slept much in a week, was something to behold. He had the look of a wild man about him, like a hermit who had taken to the hills. Brenna, opening her eyes to such a visage, could not help but start. But she supposed that she—with the exception of the facial hair—did not look much better.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Lord Glendenning, however, did not bother whispering. It was after midnight, but the earl did not care if he wakened the rest of the household.

"I think she's gone," he said in a voice that shook.

Brenna flung a horrified glance to the figure on the bed. Flora did lie still as death. Gone from her face was the pallor that had lain, like a mask, across her pretty features. Her cheeks were tinged with pink, her lips, which had been chapped, moistly parted.

Brenna had seen corpses before. She knew that often, an expression of beatific peace appeared on the deceased's face just before death's final blow. Such, she thought instantly, was the case here.

"Oh, my lord," she said, reaching out to touch his arm. "I'm so sorry." This seemed an inadequate expression of the real loss she felt, and so she added the name that no one, to her knowledge, ever called him to his face. "Iain."

The earl's face crumpled with grief. He flung himself against Brenna and buried his head against her shoulder as his large body was wracked with deep, bitter sobs.

Brenna, completely unprepared for this display, awkwardly patted him on the back, and whispered platitudes, knowing as she did so that the gesture was useless, but unable to think what else to do.

The earl's outburst woke one person in the house, at least. Reilly, who'd taken to sleeping on the settle he'd been offered his first night in Lyming, soon appeared in the doorway, blinking groggily.

Seeing Brenna engulfed in the earl's embrace, his eyes went wide, and he no longer looked a bit sleepy. Brenna, noticing him, lifted the hand she'd been using to pat the earl consolingly, and pointed in Flora's direction.

Reilly wasted no time. He lifted the stethoscope that sat upon the small table beside Flora's bed, and laid it across the girl's chest. Then, lowering his ear to it, he listened for any sound of breath or heartbeat.

" 'Tis my fault," Lord Glendenning was sobbing into Brenna's neck—which his whiskers were irritating mightily. "If I'd married her, like I should have, she'd never have gotten sick. She wouldna have drunk that foul water, and she'd be fine now."

"It wasn't your fault," Brenna said. "You didn't know. None of us knew. . . ."

It was Reilly who hissed for them both to be quiet. Brenna, sensing in the manner in which Reilly held himself that something unusual was occurring, urged Lord Glendenning to control himself.

"What is it, Reilly?" she whispered, when the earl had finally swallowed back his tears.

Reilly, his ear still pressed to the stethoscope, said, "It's the oddest thing. Her heartbeat's quite strong. And her breathing—"

It was at this point that Flora suddenly opened her eyes. Lord Glendenning cried out in glad astonishment, and even Brenna, watching from the corner of the room, gave a start.

"Hullo," Flora said, looking down at the stethoscope. "What are you doing there?"

Her voice was very weak, but the intonation was definitely that of the Flora they all knew, and not the delirious ravings which were all that had come out of her for the past week or so.

Lord Glendenning let out another cry, and fell—with a thud that shook the building to its floorboards—to his knees beside the girl's bed.

"Flora," he cried. "Are you well then?"

Flora looked at him curiously. "I think so. I'm awfully hungry, though."

Brenna, stunned, could only blink at the girl. It was Reilly who, lifting the stethoscope from the girl's chest, said, "Hungry. Did you hear that, Brenna? She says she's hungry."

It was only when Brenna clapped her hands to her cheeks in disbelief that she felt the tears there. "Oh," she said, drawing her fingers away, and looking at the wetness that glistened upon them. "Oh, dear."

“What can she have to eat?” Lord Glendenning whirled upon her eagerly. “What can I give her?”

Brenna looked questioningly at Reilly. “Bread might be all right,” she said. “Don’t you think? Soaked in some milk?”

Reilly, observing that the earl and the barmaid seemed deeply engrossed in sharing loving looks and whispered endearments, cocked his head at Brenna.

“Shall we raid the larder, Miss Donnegal?”

She was busy wiping her cheeks with her sleeve. “By all means,” she said.

They crept down the darkened staircase and into the tavern’s main room, where no drunken customers lolled, even the men of Lyming being too caught up in nursing their ill family members to think of wallowing in the village pub. Brenna, as she followed behind Reilly, who’d had the presence of mind to light a candle, could not help thinking how odd it all was . . . the two of them, the only souls awake—beside Flora and the earl—in a home that was not even theirs. Mrs. Murphy and her diminutive, fisherman husband, had gone to bed long ago—but not after one last, impassioned plea with Brenna to give them back their own pump handle, which she’d removed from the washbasin in the pub’s kitchen.

No one, Brenna reflected grimly, understood. And until she forced those fools at the Royal College of Physicians to accepted her theory as fact, no one ever would.

“Let’s see what we have here,” Reilly said, opening the larder door, and holding the candle high so he could see what it contained. “Milk. Here we are. Do you want to slice the bread?”

Brenna reached for a loaf and did so, thinking all the while to herself, Why, this is the first time we’ve been alone . . . really alone . . . in ages. I wonder if he’s going to ask me—

“I say, Brenna.” Reilly’s head was still behind the larder door. All she could see of him was an indistinct and hazy shadow in the glow from his candle. “I know what this is all about.”

Damn! She nearly sliced off her finger in her distraction.

“What all what is about?” she asked to stall for time. Be strong, she told herself. You know the longer you wait, the harder it will be. Like . . . well, like cutting off a part of yourself.

“This. This wall you’ve put up around yourself.” Reilly, the milk retrieved, closed the larder door with his foot, and set the candle upon the tabletop Brenna was using as a breadboard. “I know what it’s about. And I just want you to know that, well, I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

Brenna blinked at him. “You don’t.”

“No.” In the candlelight, she saw that his expression was one of great seriousness. For once, there

was not even a hint of laughter in those dark eyes. “In spite of what those two blithering dolts might have told you. Christine’s marriage . . . why, it doesn’t mean a thing to me. It certainly doesn’t mean I’m going back. For God’s sake, Brenna, you of all people should know that Christine King doesn’t mean a thing to me anymore.”

Brenna felt her lips press together. She was not going to say what she wanted to say. She was going to go about this in a dignified, ladylike manner. She was not going to—

“Christine?” she cried, shrilly. “Christine? You think this is about *Christine*?”

It was Reilly’s turn to blink. He said, though not quite as self-assuredly as before, “Well. Yes. I spoke with Pearson and Shelley about it. They told me everything. So don’t try to deny it, Brenna. You might, at the very least, do me the courtesy of being honest.”

She brought flashing eyes up to meet his gaze. “As you’ve always been honest with me, you mean, *my lord*?”

“Yes,” he said, some of his bravado returning. “Just as . . .”

His voice trailed off.

“What did you just call me?” Reilly asked, softly.

“I think you heard me, *Lord Stillworth*.”

“Oh,” he said. His voice had lost any edge it might have had. Now it was tinged only with chagrin. “Which one of them told you?”

“Neither,” she said. She pulled out the book that had rested in her trouser pocket all evening, and opened it to the flyleaf.

Edgar Reilly Willoughby Stanton, eighth Marquis of Stillworth, read the bookplate pasted there.

Reilly stared down at it as if he’d never seen it before. Then he lifted his gaze, and Brenna saw that the laughter was back in his dark eyes.

“So you know the worst at last,” he said. “I knew I couldn’t keep it from you for long. But there’s no use my denying it now. It’s true. My Christian name really *is* Edgar.”

Brenna slammed the book shut.

“Dammit, Reilly,” she snapped. She was horrified to find that tears had started in her eyes. The strain. The strain that she’d been under, with Flora so ill, and everyone shouting at her about the pump. That was why she was crying. That was why.

No. That wasn’t why. Her heart was breaking. *That* was why.

Reilly saw the tears, and abruptly dropped his joking manner.

“Brenna,” he said, softly, reaching for her. “I know I ought to have told you. I tried, honestly, I did. I kept thinking . . . well, I kept thinking I’d wait until I’d proved to you that I’m not like them, those men who treated your father so shabbily. Because honestly, I’m not. Not every physician who also happens to hold a title is a charlatan, you know. . . .”

She jerked from his grasp—not because the thought of him touching her was repellant, but because she knew that if she let him touch her, she’d never be able to do what she had to.

“Reilly, you *lied* to me,” she said.

“I didn’t.” He shook his head. “I might have neglected to mention it, but I never lied.”

Brenna thrust an accusing finger at him. “You led me to believe that you were a country doctor, and content to remain so!”

“But I am,” he cried. “I am content to remain so.”

“But you can’t.” She shook her head until her red curls whipped her cheeks. “You can’t be a country doctor here on Skye and a marquis back at Stillworth Park.”

Reilly knit his brows. “I can’t? Why can’t I?”

“My God, Reilly, do you think I’m stupid? I may have been born on Skye, but I do know that the landed gentry have a responsibility to their estates. They can’t simply wander off and . . . and establish medical practices in obscure parts of the world.”

Reilly thrust out his jaw. “No? Well, this one did.”

“And already your people have attempted to fetch you back.”

“My people?” Reilly glared at her. “Those weren’t my people. That was Pearson and Shelley. They’re nobodies.”

“Reilly.” She glared right back. “It’s no good. I know what you’re trying to do, but it won’t work. I can’t do it.”

He threw his hands into the air. “Do what? Brenna, what are you talking about?”

“I can’t be Lady Stillworth.” Tears were still glistening in her eyes, but her voice was firm. “I could have been Mrs. Stanton. I’d have been content to be Mrs. Stanton. But I can’t possibly be Lady Stillworth. Don’t you see? It’s impossible. I could never do it. I’d hate it. Every minute of every day, I’d hate it. Garden parties and tea with duchesses and balls and trips to the milliners and instructing the housekeeper and oh, God, Reilly! I should go straight out of my head in a month!”

Reilly could only gape at her. He could not, for the life of him, think of a reply.

“And even if I tried—for your sake—I should never be good enough,” Brenna went on passionately. “I should never do as well as . . . well, a girl like your Miss King. And after a bit—not right away, maybe, but after a while—you’d grow to resent me, and then . . . oh, I wouldn’t be able to stand it.” She tried to formulate into words what had been pressing so hard onto her heart for the past few weeks.

“When you were shot—” Her voice had dropped to a whisper now. “—and I thought I might have to live without you . . . Reilly, I’ve never been so scared. I don’t think I could ever live through something like that again.”

“And you won’t have to,” Reilly assured her, reaching out to successfully capture her hands in his. “Brenna, I swear to you, it will never happen again. Mackafee and I are friends now. . . .” He grimaced. “Well, more or else.”

She shook her head. “So it *was* Mr. Mackafee,” she said with a sigh. “You never said. . . .”

“No, I didn’t, but I swear to you, Brenna, that’s the last secret I have. There isn’t a single solitary other thing you don’t know about me—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Brenna said shaking her head some more. “Don’t you see, Reilly? It doesn’t matter, because I can’t be with you. I can’t be Lady Stillworth, and you—well, I don’t believe it’s possible they’ll ever let you be plain Dr. Stanton. I think it’s better we just put a stop to things now, before it . . . well, before it gets any harder for me to let you go.”

Of all the reactions she expected from him, the last one she’d expected was laughter. But that was exactly the reaction she got. He drew her into his arms—though she tried to resist the embrace—and shook with laughter, even as he kept her from wriggling away.

“I’m glad you find all this so amusing,” she finally snapped, genuinely annoyed. “Now if you wouldn’t mind letting *me* in on the joke—”

“I’m sorry,” Reilly chuckled, into her neck. “It’s only that Christine wanted just the opposite—to be Lady Stillworth, as opposed to plain Mrs. Stanton—”

Brenna’s efforts to escape his embrace grew even more earnest.

“*Her*, again,” she growled. “I can tell you honestly, I am heartily sick of hearing about Miss Christine King—”

“You should be very thankful to her,” Reilly interrupted. “After all, she’s the reason I came here in the first place—”

Brenna made a movement to escape his embrace, but he snatched her back.

“But she’s not,” he said, his voice as firm as his grip on her, “why I’m staying.” He pushed her a little away from him, so he could look into her eyes as he said, “It’s true. I did come here to prove something. I told myself—and you—that it was to prove something to my former fiancée, but it’s been good long time since I’ve believed that. I came to prove something to myself, Brenna. And do you know what? I have. I’ve proved that I’m capable of doing far more than just writing out a few prescriptions for foot powders and hysteria.”

He reached out to cup her face in both hands as he looked down into her eyes. “*You* helped proved it to me, Brenna. *You* made me a better doctor—a better man—than I ever thought I could be. You challenged me, and you pushed me . . . and I fell in love with you for it. And all I can say is that if you want to stay on this island and be Mrs. Reilly Stanton, you won’t hear any word of objection from me. *I* don’t care where we are, so long as we’re together.” He laid a tender kiss upon her forehead, then pulled her close again, before saying, into her hair, “And God knows no one at Stillworth Park cares where I am, so long as I come home in December to hand out the Christmas hams to the crofters.”

Brenna, standing in his arms, could hardly believe what she was hearing.

“But—” she stammered. “But—”

“But what?” His voice rumbled beneath her ear, where she had it pressed to his coat. “We can be married just as soon as we want, can’t we? I mean, this *is* Scotland. No special licenses or posting of the banns or any of that nonsense required. . . .”

Brenna leaned against him in silent wonder. After everything she’d been through recently, it was indescribably nice simply to inhale the scent of him, which was still, after all these months, of freshly laundered shirt.

“That’s better,” he said. “Now come, kiss me and seal the bargain.”

She lifted her face and, with a strange feeling of shyness, sought his lips with hers. It was odd that she should feel shy around him, considering all that they had done with another—both inside the bedroom, and out of it, as well.

But there it was. Kissing him now was like kissing someone new. . . .

For about a second. And then, as the kiss grew deeper, and his arms tightened around her, the quick hot flame she always felt when he came near flared. . . .

And she found herself kissing him as wildly as she ever had before—

Until he, with shaking fingers, pried her arms from around his neck and said, in an unsteady voice, “I never thought I’d have to say this, but, really, my dear . . . we’re forgetting our patient.”

Brenna gasped. “Flora!”

“Waiting for her breakfast.” Reilly’s expression was a curious mingling of good humor and desire. “Later?”

She nodded eagerly, then got up to fetch a bowl in which to soak the bread. Reilly, rising from his knees, groaned a little.

“Just promise me one thing,” he said, as he rubbed his sore shoulder.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“That I can make a few alterations on the cottage. I want to put in a porcelain tub, one I can stretch out in when I need to soak any more gunshot wounds I might acquire. Promise?”

She grinned at him in the candlelight. “Promise,” she said.



“I require and charge you all,” the Reverend Marshall intoned, “that if anyone here today is aware of an impediment why these two may not lawfully be wed, you must confess it now, or forever hold your peace. . . .”

The minister paused, as ministers always did after saying these words. It was not, however, perfectly quiet in the church. Hamish MacGregor, one of the congregation, let out a squeal as his little brother Seumas, fully recovered from his brush with cholera, slipped into his best coat pocket a small brown mouse he had been keeping as a pet, unbeknownst to his parents.

Reilly sent the two boys a stern look, and they immediately quieted. Still, Hamish’s delighted cavorting, as the mouse wriggled in his pocket, was distracting. Harold Mackafee, standing straight and tall beside his family—looking like a different man in the almost-new suit of clothes he’d purchased with some of the money he’d earned helping to haul nets on Adam MacAdams’s fishing boat—frowned down at some of his younger children, who were tittering at the sight of Hamish’s mouse. Even the four golden-haired flower girls—one of whom, not being old enough yet to sit up, lay in her big sister’s arms—broke from their carefully orchestrated rank alongside their mother, straining to get a look at the tiny creature.

It was exactly at this point—just as Reverend Marshall was turning toward the groom to ask if he took this woman in holy matrimony—that a voice rang out from the back of the church.

“I object!”

Naturally, everyone spun about to see who could possibly object to such a nice young couple finally—as everyone always suspected they would—tying the knot. But coming down the aisle was a handsome, gray-haired gentleman, in the unmistakable garb of a London gentleman, no one had ever seen before.

No one, that is, except Brenna, apparently, since she inhaled rather sharply and shrank a bit behind Reilly.

“I demand that this farce of a wedding be stopped at once,” boomed the gentleman.

Reverend Marshall looked stunned. His wife, at the organ, had to be passed a vinaigrette, provided by one of her daughters, to keep from fainting, something she’d taken to doing on a regular basis since

that evening she'd been so savagely attacked by a rat in the formal dining room of Castle Glendenning.

"M-may I ask, sir," the minister stammered, "what the nature of this impediment might be?"

"Only that my niece, the bride, has not her parents' permission to marry." The handsome gentleman approached the bride, whose face was veiled in handmade Venetian lace, and said, "I am ashamed of you. Go back to Burn Cottage at once. I have a few things I'd like to say to this incorrigible young man, here."

The bride threw back her veil and revealed a lovely heart-shaped face, framed by a mass of blonde ringlets.

"Excuse me," Flora said, in tones of great indignation. "But you ain't *my* uncle."

Behind the handsome—and now thoroughly confused—gentleman, Brenna gently cleared her voice.

"Uncle Euan," she said, wagging her fingers from the pew in which she and Reilly sat. "Over here."

The handsome older gentleman flushed. He flushed even more when the groom, Lord Glendenning, who was wearing all of his best tartans for the occasion, said, "See here, what'sa the meaning of this, bustin' up my wedding? Get out, before I break your head."

Beside Reilly, Brenna whispered, "I think we had better go."

"Rather," Reilly said, and helped her to her feet.

Outside in the sunshine, the man whom Brenna had referred to as "Uncle Euan" wasted no time in lighting into his recalcitrant niece.

"What," he thundered, "is the meaning of this? What are you doing here on Skye, when you are supposed to be in Bath, for God's sake? And what's this I hear about your marrying some fellow none of us have ever heard of?"

"Uncle Euan," Brenna began, with a patience Reilly envied. "I can explain—"

"You'd better. You'd better do a lot of explaining, and those explanations had better be good. First we discover that some new treatise on the spread of cholera has been introduced to the Royal College of Physicians under your father's name, and then I get *this*. . . ." He waved the letter some more. "Explaining that you are on Skye and are planning on marrying some fellow none of us have ever met, when all the time, your aunt and I thought you were staying with Elizabeth Sexton in *Bath*—"

"I say, sir," Reilly felt compelled to interrupt. "But I'm afraid I must take exception to your shouting at my wife in that manner."

“Your Grace!” thundered Brenna’s uncle.

Reilly blinked. “I beg your pardon, sir, but I think there’s been some misunderstanding. I am not a duke.”

“No,” Brenna’s uncle shouted. “But I am! I happen to be the Duke of Camden, you young no-account, and I’d appreciate it if you’d address me as befits my title. And what do you mean, calling this girl your *wife*?”

Reilly, thoroughly confused, blinked at Brenna. Her uncle? A duke? But then that would mean. . . .

“Uncle Euan.” Brenna released Reilly’s arm, and took her uncle’s, instead. “Reilly and I were married *last* Saturday. My letter, um, must have been delayed. So when it said Saturday next, I suppose you thought it meant *this* Saturday, but as you can see—”

“Fine,” her uncle interrupted. “Well, that’s just fine. An annulment. I demand an annulment.”

“Uncle Euan,” Brenna said, rolling her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous about it?” The duke didn’t even glance at her. “It’s quite a simple matter. My lawyers can draw up the papers in no time at all.”

Reilly, who was feeling more thoroughly confused by the moment, almost shouted his next words.

“Seeing as how by Christmas, you’ll be a great-uncle to our son or daughter, I don’t think an annulment is possible, *Your Grace*—even if either of us wanted one, which, of course, we don’t. We are quite deeply in love.”

Brenna’s uncle stared at them for so long that Brenna shook his arm a little, to make sure he hadn’t slipped into some sort of stupor of shock.

“Uncle Euan?” She looked up at him anxiously. “Are you all right?”

When her uncle made no reply, she glanced at Reilly.

“I think we’ve killed him,” she said worriedly.

Reilly glared at the older man with annoyance. He rather hoped the duke *had* suffered an apoplexy. Interfering in-laws he did not need.

The duke disappointed him, however, by recovering enough to say, in a disbelieving voice, “You unscrupulous dog. Married last week and expecting a child already—”

“My lord,” Reilly said stonily.

The duke broke off and looked at him in astonishment. “I beg your pardon?”

“You called me a dog. I happen to be,” Reilly said coolly, “the eighth Marquis of Stillworth, and I’d appreciate it if you’d address me as befits my title.”

The duke’s jaw sagged. Brenna used the opportunity to pat him on the shoulder and say, “Now, Uncle, I know you’re angry, but really, I think you and Reilly are going to get on very well indeed. Why, he helped to save dozens of lives last month, when there was a horrible outbreak of cholera here on the island. It was with Reilly’s help that I was finally able to prove Father’s theory, too. And we’re going to stay here on Skye and continue Father’s work . . . at least until he and Mamma get back. Then we’re planning on establishing our own practice, a bit north from here. So you see, he really isn’t a bit of a wastrel.”

“Marquis of Stillworth.” As Brenna had spoken, her uncle had undergone a rather dramatic change. He was no longer brooding, nor apoplectic. He looked, in fact, like a man doing some swift mental calculations inside his head.

“The Marquis of Stillworth,” he said again. “Why, I know your mother.”

Reilly, not quite so willing to let go of the grudge he’d developed against the man, said uninterestedly, “Do you?”

“Indeed I do. Quite the most gracious hostess in London. The Marquis of Stillworth. Heavens me, I had no idea.”

What was doubtlessly causing Reilly’s rapid rise in estimation in the eyes of the duke was his knowledge that the Marquis of Stillworth was worth over twenty thousand pounds a year—a fact with which Brenna was not yet acquainted, but which nearly every parent with eligible daughters, of which the duke was one, was only too well aware.

For the first time, however, Reilly felt he couldn’t resent his fortune. Not if it helped smooth the way with Brenna’s family, which, in fact, it appeared to be doing rather nicely.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” the duke said. “Only when I first heard about it. . . . Well, she is, after all, my brother’s only daughter, and I—”

Reilly gave the man a tepid smile. “It’s quite all right,” he said.

“Well, I suppose I—um, wait here a moment, the two of you, would you? There’s something . . . Just wait here.”

With that mysterious command, the Duke of Camden took off through the churchyard toward a waiting horse and carriage . . . a horse and carriage that could only have come from Portree, since it certainly was owned by no one in Lyming.

Brenna, astonished by her uncle's change of heart, was bubbling over with excitement.

"Why, he likes you, Reilly," she cried. "I didn't think he was going to—and when you told him about the baby, I thought we were finished. But then he came around admirably, I thought."

"Indeed," Reilly said. "Brenna, was there something you forgot to mention to me?"

She looked puzzled. "Forgot? Why, no. . . ."

"For instance, that your uncle is a *duke*?"

"Oh." She bit her lush lower lip. "Yes, I suppose I did leave that bit out."

"Which means your father is the son of a duke?"

"Yes, I suppose he is."

Reilly raised his eyebrows. "Which means you're the *granddaughter* of a duke."

Slowly, color began to fill Brenna's cheeks. "Yes," she said. "That's true."

"So all of those things you said—" Reilly was trying very hard to remain calm. "—about despising peers who sought careers in medicine for their own aggrandizement. . . ."

"But my father," Brenna hastened to inform him, "is completely different from those men. He may be a duke's son, but he really and truly cares about helping people. Why else would he have come to Skye in the first place? And he refuses to go, you know, by his title—"

"But the fact of the matter is," Reilly interrupted, "that you are, and have been since birth, the Lady Brenna."

"Well," she said, looking very uncomfortable. "Yes. But it's something we've always liked to keep quiet about. We never wanted people to think we were putting on airs—"

"And the reason—" Reilly was beginning to see the humor in the situation. "The reason Lord Glendenning was so eager to marry you was not, as you insisted, because you were the only woman on the island he hadn't had, but because you were the only woman on the island of equal *rank*—"

"I think," Brenna said, her gaze apologetic, "a little of both, actually."

But she needn't have worried. Her husband was chuckling now, though he knew that, in light of the serious ceremony taking place just inside the church, this was hardly appropriate.

His laughter abruptly stopped, however, when he saw Brenna's expression. She was looking past him, at two people who were emerging from the carriage her uncle had arrived in, a tall, distinguished-looking man, and a woman of much smaller stature, both of whom were looking eagerly

in her direction.

Reilly realized who they were even before he heard Brenna's gasp and felt her fingers leave his arm as she began to hurry down the church steps, toward them. He recognized them from the miniatures he'd seen in her parents' bedroom.

And when he was joined by the duke a few seconds later, his suspicions were confirmed.

"Your new mother- and father-in-law. They only got back from Bombay," Brenna's uncle explained casually, "last week. Had a devil of a time convincing them to stay in the carriage. Niall—that's your new father-in-law, you know—was all set to kill you. I finally managed to talk him into waiting while I investigated the situation."

Reilly studied Lord Niall as he swept his daughter into an embrace. Not, he decided, a fellow whom it would behoove to displease.

"Mairi's a bit more understanding," Euan explained. Reilly watched as Brenna's mother—diminutive beside her statuesque daughter—took a turn at embracing his new wife. "Always been more of a romantic than Niall."

The duke went on, "I've explained the situation, and I think I can safely say I've managed to talk them out of killing you."

Reilly, watching Brenna pull on her parents' arms, urging them toward him, swallowed.

"Well," the duke said. "What are you waiting for? Go on, lad."

Reilly, his head high, strode toward his new family.

Author's Note

The village of Lyming, on the Isle of Skye, is a fictional creation of the author. It is unfortunately true, however, that outbreaks of cholera did plague most of Europe—and coastal villages in particular—from 1831 until well into the 1850s. Before the first wave of the epidemic had run its course through the British Isles, cholera took over 52,000 lives, or one fifth of the general population of any given community. British doctors were completely unprepared for and defenseless against the Asiatic disease, which was unlike anything then known.

In the autumn of 1848, following the action in this story, another wave of cholera struck 50,000 dead, as many as it had in 1831. This occurred because, despite the fact that some physicians had begun to make the connection between contaminated water and outbreaks of the contagion, the traditional medical establishment continued to hold to the belief that diseases such as cholera were generated spontaneously from filth (pythogenesis) and transmitted by noxious invisible gas, or miasma. They continued to believe this even after the 1854 Broad Street pump incident, in which John Snow, considered today to be the father of modern epidemiology, removed the handle from a pump he believed to be distributing cholera-contaminated water to a London community, thus ending an outbreak in that area.

The author wishes to thank epidemiologist Melissa Ehman, MPH, for her exhaustive help with the research for this story. Any historical inaccuracies are, of course, the author's own.

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LADY of SKYE

Creator:
PATRICIA CABOT

Subject:
Fiction

Description:
Dr. Reilly Stanton must mend his injured pride by proving himself a hero—and not a drunken wastrel, as his former fiancée claimed. So against his better judgement he takes up a medical post in a tiny fishing village on the remote Isle of Skye. There he meets the highly attractive Miss Brenna Donnegal. She has filled her father's former role as the local physician, and is more than annoyed to find the urbane Dr. Stanton taking over her work and her father's cottage. She decides to teach him a lesson but a raging tug-of-war between the two proud hearts soon leads to a passionate fire.

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