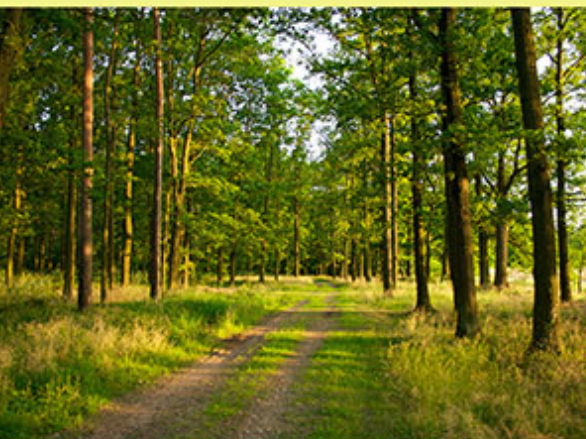


LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

**REUBALTACH
CRIDHE**

K. Mason

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

REUBALTACH CRIDHE

By **K. Mason**

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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REUBALTACH CRIDHE

By K. Mason

Photo Description

In a wood, a young man wearing a green tartan kilt sits astride a dark bay horse. His brown hair is messy and he stares intently at something out of sight; he doesn't look happy. In his left hand he holds a claymore, horizontally, the blade above his knee. You can see that his knee is bare between his riding boots and the hem of his kilt.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

As you can see we're in Scotland. The year is 1745 and the Jacobite rebellion spells disaster for the Highland clansmen who followed Bonnie Prince Charlie into battle against the English.

It's so not the right time for this man to fall in love which of course means that, inevitably, he does. But with who? A fellow rebel? An English soldier? A man from a rival clan?

I leave the details in your capable hands, dear Author, but if you could find room in your story for a couple of Gaelic endearments and that fabulous horse he's riding, I'd be thrilled.

Could you please make sure that my lovely highlander finds happiness—even after Prince Charlie has fled the blood-soaked battlefield at Culloden.

Sincerely,

Astrid

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: soldiers, Scotland, enemies to lovers, deserters, low sex content, hurt/comfort, kilts

Word Count: 21,142

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thank you to Astrid for putting the prompt together. I hadn't intended to write a historical story for this year's event, but this just grabbed me. I hope I've done justice to the story you wanted.

Thank you as always to the DRitC organisation team and the volunteers who work so hard behind the scenes to put the event together. In particular, thanks to Debbie, my editor for this year's event.

Without a lot of people this story would not have been written, but particular thanks go to the online support group of whip wielders and cheerleaders in the M/M Writers Group. To Kat, Elci and Kaje for bravely reading the very first draft and helping me make the story so much better. And finally, to my friend Rachel, who has been listening to me wail about my writing for the last ten years, yet continues to encourage me and has bravely taken to beta reading M/M romance even though she doesn't read the genre herself.

REUBALTACH CRIDHE

By K. Mason

The snow was falling faster now. Large, white flakes danced in the air around us. It settled in a thick layer on the ground we rode over, leaving no sign of the moorland we were crossing. I could only hope that we were on the right path and that we would reach Lockerbie before sundown. Not that I'd be able to tell when the sun set; I could barely see twenty yards ahead. Occasionally as we rode through the barren, white silence, the outline of a solitary tree would appear out the gloom as we passed it, but nothing else. I'd not heard birdsong, or the call of cattle or sheep, for at least the past two hours.

Suddenly Bran stumbled, throwing Alex back against me in the saddle and jerking me out of the hypnotic trance I hadn't even realised I'd fallen into. Even as his right shoulder dipped sharply, I pulled up on the reins I held in one hand. With the other I held tight to Alex's belt, trying to prevent him from sliding from his perch on the pommel in front of me.

Even the violent jolt that I must have given him didn't stir any sort of response. He remained slumped heavily in my arms.

"Steady, Bran. Steady," I muttered to my usually sure-footed mount. The only response was a slight shake of his head and flick of one ear to indicate that he'd heard me. There was no energy in his gait as he walked forward again. He was exhausted; we all were. Bran and I had been on the road since we'd fled Derby with the rest of the Jacobite army over a fortnight ago, and it was six days since we'd fought the Government Army at Clifton and Bran had taken on the double weight of myself and Alex.

We plodded on, through the growing darkness. Suddenly Alex jumped in my grip and began to mumble, the words indecipherable.

"Hey, are you awake again?" I asked, gently shaking him.

"Sorry, should have stayed. Gone back." His words were slurred.

"Too late for that now. We must be nearly there." I tried to sound optimistic.

"So cold," he muttered again.

“We’ll find somewhere soon—get some hot food and sleep.” Alex didn’t reply, slipping again into unconsciousness.

Getting somewhere we could warm up would be welcome. I could barely feel the fingers of my hand which held the reins. My legs, between the tops of my boots and the hem of my kilt, were numb and blue with cold. But the front of my body remained warm from the heat which radiated off of Alex’s back as he leant against me. Despite the heat he was giving off, he shivered violently. I could hear his teeth rattle together as each spasm passed through him.

When we’d left the small, isolated, wooden shepherd’s hut this morning, the sun had been shining in a clear blue sky. Alex had been lucid, and seemed to be recovering well from the gunshot wound in his calf. The fever he’d been suffering from when we arrived seemed to have passed in the three days we’d holed up there. It had been his decision that he was fit enough to move on, to get further from the border, and closer to home: a decision I was regretting letting him make.

The hut hadn’t been much—no more than a small cabin on wheels, set in the sheltered corner of a remote field some miles outside of Rigg. But we’d had shelter. There had been a store of wood, which we used for a fire, and a plentiful supply of water from a nearby stream, once we’d broken the ice that formed each night. We even found some oats and barley to make a hot, if fairly bland, gruel.

When we’d arrived, I’d cleaned the long, but thankfully shallow, gash in Alex’s leg as best I could, using the only thing available—boiled water and a dash of whisky from the flask I carried in my sporran. Afterward, I’d wrapped it in a bandage I’d made from ripping up my spare shirt. The musket ball had gashed the skin and torn into the muscle, lightly burning the outside of the wound. But I was as sure as I could be that it had not lodged in the wound. The bone appeared undamaged, and Alex could put weight on the leg, though not without pain.

We’d spent much of the last three days huddled together on a bed that was no more than a straw-stuffed mattress on top of a pallet, while we recovered from the flight we had made from Carlisle the day before.

After Clifton, where I’d picked Alex up off of the field when the battle was over, he’d been placed in my care by my clan chief. We’d set out the next day for Carlisle with the rest of the regiment, but we’d fallen behind. Carrying two of us, Bran could not cover the distance as quickly as the other mounts. We’d made it only as far as Gaitskell the first day, spending the night in a

tumbledown barn by the wayside. The next day we made it to Carlisle, only to arrive just hours after the Duke of Cumberland and his men had marched into town.

The red-coated soldiers of the Government Army were everywhere within the town. We learnt quickly from the townsfolk that my own regiment was within the castle itself, and that preparations were being made for a siege. I was braced for trouble, expecting at any point that Alex would call out to his comrades for rescue. But he didn't. Instead, when we were stopped, he lied, quite expertly, telling the guard that I was his prisoner, taken after Clifton and to be held pending transportation to London.

Without discussion, we had taken the road north out of the city, crossing the River Eden on the old stone bridge. Only after we'd cleared the city did either of us mention what would happen next.

My own appetite for the cause, to return Charles Stuart to the throne of Britain, had long since been lost completely. I'd marched with Clan MacPherson, under Chief Euan of Cluny, as an obligation. I was only a peripheral member of the clan, from a branch family of retainers rather than lairds. I felt no personal duty or responsibility to the would-be king. I'd been on the road since August, and all I wanted to do was go home to the wilderness of the highland moors, where my family lived.

Reluctantly, I admitted as much to Alex as we rode north towards the border, fearing he would not understand my desire for desertion, of both clan and prince. My fears had been misplaced though. He was as weary of battle as I was.

We'd kept riding, across the border and into Scotland itself. Turning west in order to bypass the busy customs post at Gretna, it had been our intention to pick up the drove road to Annan and from there to head north again, but late in the afternoon Alex was struck by fever again. As the night closed in, the temperature dropped below freezing. I'd been supporting Alex by this time, holding him in place in front of me as he alternately shivered and sweated when we happened upon the shepherd's hut.

For the best part of three days we did nothing but rest. I ventured out only to tend to Bran, my loyal horse who had carried us so far. The hut had no stable, but a copse of trees by the stream provided enough of a shelter, and I shared the oats I found with him to supplement the meagre winter grazing available.

Alex's fever got worse at first. He tossed and turned, in his delirium fighting the scratchy woollen blankets I put over him, unless I lay with him to

keep him calm. On the second day the fever seemed to break and Alex was able to sit up and eat a little. He also took more of an interest in where we were and in planning where we would go next.

Outside it remained bitterly cold, with high winds that drove squally sleet and rain showers against the side of our shelter. We spent much of the third day as we had the first two: trying to decide what we should do once Alex had recovered enough for us to move on.

We'd woken this morning to the sound of birdsong for the first time. Looking out of the hut door, it appeared that although the temperature had not risen by much, at least the skies were clear. My suggestion of staying put for another day or so while Alex recovered was met with a stubborn refusal. He ignored my argument that we both needed more rest, as did Bran, and remained adamant that we should get further away from the border. His plan was that we should press on to Lockerbie, where he had friends within the Johnstone family: major landowners in the town, who would be able to provide us with somewhere to stay. It was like arguing with a brick wall for all that he listened to me, and eventually I gave up.

We rode away from Rigg, picking up the drove road, while it was still early. At first we talked as we travelled along the track way, but gradually I realised that the conversation was becoming increasingly one-sided. The chills started first. He tried to hide it, stiffening his spine to prevent himself from shaking, but as he was seated directly in front of me I couldn't help but notice the fine tremors that ran through him. It was only an hour or so before the fever returned fully, the heat emanating from him like I was right in front of an open fire.

We stopped briefly in Annan, buying bread and wine at an inn on the high street. Alex hardly ate a morsel, but drank deeply, and insisted that we continue on, despite my protests. It wasn't long after we left town that the clouds began to build from the west, and the wind picked up. The snow started about the same time that Alex suddenly went limp and slipped sideways. He would have fallen had it not been for the grip I had on his belt. Tightening my hold, I pulled him back towards me, letting him rest against my chest. There was no response to my urgent queries as to whether he was all right. I considered pulling over off the road, but there was nothing that offered any shelter in sight.

And so we continued.

I realised that night was closing in as the dull grey sky grew darker. The snow showed no signs of letting up. I was seriously considering stopping at the next hedgerow or tree that would offer us any protection at all when, to my right, I caught sight of a bright light which seemed to hang in the air.

“*Buidheachas do Dhía.*” I muttered the thanks to a God I wasn’t sure that I even believed in anymore.

Turning Bran, I nudged his flanks with my heels and encouraged him forward, off what I had hoped had been the correct path. As we made our way slowly up what turned out to be a fairly steep slope, the lights multiplied and became clearer. Soon I could make out a row of three lights, which flickered slightly, set above what I guessed to be head height: candlelight behind windows.

The whitewashed stone walls of a kirk were barely visible in the snow, but I could see clearly the short spire that rose above the main building and the slate-covered roof. A small graveyard surrounded it, the boundary marked by a drystone wall. We skirted around the outer edge of the wall, until we found the gate. I pushed Alex forward over Bran’s withers, so he didn’t bang his head, as we passed under the low wooden roof of the gate and into the graveyard. Carefully following the path towards the kirk, I pulled Bran up under a large oak tree which stood by the wall.

“Alex, can you hear me?” I asked, shaking him slightly. There was no response.

Dismounting without letting him fall was not going to be easy; he was already dead weight in my arms. Trusting Bran, I dropped my grasp on the reins and wriggled backward, pulling Alex with me so he was balanced in the saddle itself. Bran stamped his foot impatiently at the movement, not enjoying the extra pressure of my weight over his croup.

With both hands on Alex’s belt, I leant to one side of him, swinging my left leg back and over Bran’s back, slipping sideways before landing lightly on the ground. I only had seconds to right myself before Alex started to fall towards me. The only sound he made was a pained sob as his injured leg scraped across the leather of the saddle.

“Steady, I’ve got you,” I reassured him as I steadied him on his feet, moving my grip so I had my arm now slung around his waist.

I had to almost drag him towards Bran’s head, where I propped him up against the wall, while I tied Bran’s reins to a low branch of the tree. I kicked at

the snow to uncover some sparse grass that my poor horse could graze on, before digging into my sporran for the twist of cloth in which I'd stored a handful of oats.

"There you go, boy." He lipped gently at the oats I offered, his breath warm on my frozen fingers. When the food was gone, I gently stroked his nose, before briefly resting my head against his. "Wait here, I'll be back for you shortly."

Carefully I pulled Alex upright. He was too heavy for me to carry. Our progress through the graveyard towards the church's doorway was slow and painful, each step marked by Alex's sharp intake of breath.

A small porch sheltered the heavy-looking wooden door of the church. On each side a candle lit the entrance. The door itself was ajar and I pushed gently, letting it open just enough to slip through into the building and drag Alex with me. Our footsteps, which had been muffled by the snow-covered grass, sounded suddenly loud on the stone floor of the high-ceilinged chapel.

"Who disturbs this service in our house of God?" a voice demanded loudly from the far side of the church.

Looking up, I realised that our entrance must have disturbed the evening worship. The congregation, seated in the plain wooden pews, had turned as one to look at us. A few gasps arose, mainly from women and children. Most of the men rose immediately to their feet, some pushing loved ones behind them and moving to the aisle.

"Be seated," the priest, standing by the lectern to one side of the altar, commanded. Some of the men obeyed, but others remained standing.

"We mean no harm," I reassured them. "We are seeking help. My friend is injured and we have desperate need of a doctor."

As I spoke, Alex swayed in my grip and stumbled forwards. I couldn't hold him and he crumpled to the ground. The priest left the altar and hurried towards us, a couple of the parishioners followed in his wake.

"Are you armed?" the priest asked as he reached us. When I nodded, he continued, "There is no place for weapons in a church. Take whatever you have and leave them outside the door and we will assist."

I bent and removed the dirk from Alex's left boot, and the pistol he had attached to his belt, before backing slowly to the door, keeping the barrel of the

firearm down towards the floor. The older of the men with the priest followed me out through the door, where I quickly discarded Alex's weapons and began to shed my own.

"That's a fine arsenal," the man commented blandly, as I lay my claymore on the ground. "You've been with the Young Pretender's Army then?"

"I have," I replied shortly.

"The other young man though, that's not a Stuart tartan he's wearing."

"No, he's a MacDonnell."

"A MacDonnell?"

"Of Glengarry."

"So, he fought with the English then?"

"He did."

"And now?"

I turned to stand facing him as he blocked my entrance back into the church. "He's injured, and needs help. May I go back in?" He nodded sharply and stepped out of the way allowing me to pass, but followed close behind.

On the other side of the door, Alex still lay on the floor where he fell, but beneath him someone had laid a thick cloak on the cold stone floor. A woman, her steel-grey hair tied back in a bun at the nape of her neck, knelt next to him. I watched as she examined his eyes, felt for a pulse at his neck, and ran the palm of her hand over his forehead before sitting back on her heels.

"Well, Margaret?" the priest asked.

"He has a high fever. I don't think it's anything infectious but I can't be sure."

"It isn't," I interrupted. "He took a shot to his right leg about five days ago."

The woman hissed through her teeth as she slowly turned Alex's leg to look at the damage. Around the wound was livid red, the flesh puffy. Slowly she leant down and delicately sniffed. Her nose wrinkled as she pulled her head back sharply.

"Infected, not too badly though. It needs cleaning out properly, and he'll need warmth and rest while he heals." She rose to her feet as she spoke.

“We were headed to Lockerbie. We can find a doctor there.”

“He’d not make it,” she said bluntly, shaking her head. “It’s a day’s ride from here in good conditions.”

“A day?” I was shocked. We’d already travelled for miles since leaving Rigg that morning. I had been sure we were closer to Lockerbie than that.

“Aye,” the man behind me agreed. “Probably would take even longer in this weather.”

“I thought we were nearer,” I confessed.

“Do you even know where you are, lad?” he asked, placing a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“I, well...” I shook my head.

“You’ve lost your way, this is Mouswald. Lockerbie lies a way north-east of here.”

“*Caoch!*” I swore.

“You’ll remember where you are,” the priest admonished. “This is no place for language like that.”

“*Tha mi duilich,*” I apologised.

“I think the best thing to do would be for them to come back with us for at least the night,” the other man who stood with the priest said decisively.

“But we need a doctor.”

“Aye, you do. And I can provide the services of one at the castle.”

“Castle?” I frowned as I tried to recall long ago history lessons of the local landholders in the area, but my mind came up blank

“Yes.” The man held out his hand to me. “I am Sir Robert Grierson, the Laird of Barquhar and Baronet of Lag. Now, Reverend.” He continued, not waiting for me to speak, “if you’ll excuse us from the rest of the service, my steward here will take these young men to our carriage. There is just enough room for us all.”

He spoke as though a final decision had been made, and with no input required from me. The man behind me let go of my shoulder and moved past me. Leaning down, he carefully scooped up Alex, and the cape he lay on, and lifted him into his arms.

“Go gently, Finlay,” Margaret cautioned as he turned towards the door and she moved to follow him. The other man took me by the arm and steered me out of the church door.

“My horse,” I said weakly, turning to where Bran was tethered.

“Of course. Do you want to ride him, or we can couple him to the carriage horse?”

“I’ll ride,” I said definitely. I wanted the space and to feel as though I had some control over what was happening.

“Fair enough then. Just stay close to the carriage. There’s a lot of water around the castle, and in these temperatures much of it will be icy. We’ve enough injuries to be dealing with just now.”

It had stopped snowing, but the wind was bitter. Bran, tired and frustrated at the slow pace of the carriage we were following, tossed his head and fought the reins as we rode away from the church and village. In the dark I could barely see a thing, but as we rode on I caught sight of lights in the distance. As we got closer, I could make out the outline of a high tower which rose over lower buildings.

The outer boundary of the castle grounds was marked with a high stone wall. We followed the carriage through the gate and up a wide driveway towards the main doors. Margaret quickly exited the carriage and headed for the entrance, which swung open. I could hear her issuing instructions to someone as I dismounted and gathered Bran’s reins under his chin.

Sir Robert approached, as I watched Finlay gently carry Alex into the castle. An uncomfortable feeling crept over me: that I should be the one carrying him, looking after him.

“Come now. My driver will take your horse round to the stables and we can go in and get warmed up.”

“I need to tend to him.”

“One of my grooms will see he gets a thorough rubdown and a decent feed. We need to get you warmed up.”

He steered me towards the door, not giving me a chance for further argument. As we drew level with the carriage, the driver took Bran’s reins from me.

“Behave,” I warned my horse, giving his neck an absent-minded pat before he was led away around the side of the castle.

I followed Sir Robert into a large, high-ceilinged hallway and caught sight of Finlay carrying Alex up a wooden staircase. On the wall at the top of the stairs hung a portrait of a man in formal tartan, with enough resemblance to our host to make the family connection obvious.

“My grandfather, Auld Lagg himself,” he confirmed with a nod to the picture and a rather grim expression. I was not surprised; the story of how the first Baronet of Lag had dealt with the Covenanters had given him a rather unsavoury notoriety.

Before I could say anything, the door to the left of the hallway opened and Margaret stepped out, carrying a heavy-looking carpet bag. She was followed by an older man, whose greying hair had receded back from his forehead.

“Robbie, what’s this about? Maggie tells me you’ve picked up a stray Sassenach soldier needing a doctor.”

“Ah Homer, yes, we are in need of your services,” Sir Robert replied, not appearing at all ruffled by the other man’s abrupt tone. “Finlay has taken him to the small guest room. I’ll get Mrs Douglas to send someone to start a fire up.”

“Get her to bring up some boiled water and cloths, we’ll need them,” Margaret said as she started up the staircase.

“Of course, will you need anything else?”

“No, we’ve a lancet, salves and bandages. We’ve some whisky too if we need it, though I gather he’s more or less out of it. If he’s that badly off though...” Finlay finished with a shrug and a shake of the head.

I tensed at the words, swept with a sudden fear that I really could lose Alex to his injuries. We were soldiers and death wasn’t unknown to us, but I realised then how much I didn’t want to lose the man who was becoming my friend.

Whilst Homer and Margaret disappeared into a corridor at the top of the stairs, Sir Robert led me down the hallway and into a large drawing room.

“I won’t be a second. I just need to speak to Mrs Douglas.”

He left me alone to look around. It was unlike other drawing rooms I’d been in; there were no frills or feminine touches. The seating was plain and unornamented, as though it was for use not for show. A pair of large, wooden chairs were positioned facing each other in front of the hearth. The wear on the

brown fabric seats gave evidence of frequent use. On a low table between them was a decanter filled with the familiar amber spirit drunk by most Scotsmen and two short-stemmed glasses.

I moved to stand in front of the fire, soaking up the warmth I'd been missing for the last few days, while I waited for Sir Robert to return.

"Come sit down." Robert indicated the seat to the left of the fire, even as he settled himself into the other chair.

"Alex?" I asked as I sat down.

"Is in very good hands," he reassured me. "My uncle, Homer, is a Surgeon Apothecary, and his wife works alongside him. They usually practice in Glasgow, but the town isn't sanitary in the winter months, so they reside here from November to March. They'll do what they can for him. Homer may be a bit gruff, but he's very good."

"Thank you, I don't know what..." Suddenly my throat seemed to close and I couldn't continue.

"You've no injuries yourself?"

"No."

"Just tired, and I guess hungry?" My stomach rumbled loudly before I could reply, and he laughed. "Mrs Douglas will bring us a bite to eat, nothing fancy mind." He pulled a face. "She wasn't best pleased with me, being disturbed while trying to prepare a special meal for tomorrow. Not that we celebrate Christmas of course."

"Christmas?"

"Aye, lad. It's Christmas Eve tonight."

"I hadn't realised. I'd rather lost track of time."

"Well, never mind about that now. Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

"Of course, my name is Gillies, Iain Gillies."

"A MacPherson then?"

"Yes, but not high in the clan. My family are retainers on Chief Euan's Blair Castle estate."

"Yet you followed your clan chief?"

"Yes, he was recruiting and there was no one else to represent our family. My father is in his fifties and needed on the land. My elder brother is married

with two bairns already and a third on the way so could not be spared. I had nothing to keep me at home.”

“No wife of your own?”

“No, I’ve never found the right woman, and as a younger son of a landless family I’m no prize husband. I’ve neither hearth nor home of my own.”

“Well, you’re welcome here whilst your friend heals up and you work out what you want to do next.”

“Why? Sorry, that was rude of me. But you don’t know either of us. Why are you offering us such hospitality?”

“Well, I could say it’s the Christmas spirit, or that I am atoning for the sins of my ancestors, but...” He paused as Finlay entered the room, carrying a tray of food.

“I met Mrs Douglas in the hallway,” he said by way of explanation as he bent to balance the tray on the table. He pushed the decanter and glasses out of the way so he could slide it safely onto the top. There was a platter of cold roast meat, venison and some game bird by the look of it, and some boiled potatoes, as well as some oat bannocks and a pot of crowdie.

“Help yourself,” Sir Robert encouraged me.

“Thank you, Sir Robert.” I leant forward to select a bannock, which I wrapped around a thick slice of the venison, before sitting back in my chair to eat.

“Just Robert will do.” With my mouthful I couldn’t ask how this man, a Baronet, whom I’d met barely two hours since, could be willing to call me a friend and give me the liberty of calling him such a familiar name, but he seemed to guess my train of thought. “We are somewhat isolated here, we don’t have many callers, and we rarely venture far. Besides which, the title is something new and I am still getting used to it.”

Finlay, who had taken up station standing behind Robert’s chair, one hand resting lightly on the backrest, laughed. “He’s never been one for formality. You’ll get used to it while you’re with us.”

“Fin here has been with our family since before I was born. Unfortunately, it means he knows me far too well.” Robert looked fondly up at the older man.

“Well, it’s a hereditary duty,” he said drily. “Looking after the Griersons.”

I had a feeling I was missing something in their exchange.

By the time I'd finished eating, tiredness was starting to overtake me. With a full stomach and the warmth of the fire after days of cold and army rations, I started to doze. Finlay picked up the almost empty tray without a word and removed it from the room, leaving me alone with Robert.

"So how did a Jacobite soldier from Perth end up in the middle of Dumfriesshire in the company of an injured member of the Government Army's infantry?" he asked as he poured whisky into the two glasses and handed me one.

"It's a long story," I replied, wondering where I should start. He didn't say anything, just waited for me to continue. "We met, which isn't the right word for it at all, around a week ago. I'd been on the road for a couple of weeks with my platoon, heading back to Scotland. We'd made it to Shap and stayed overnight. Not long after we left the next morning, there was a sighting of the English, and we stopped at a place called Clifton Moor to make ready for a potential battle. There was an engagement that night, and it went our way." I glossed over some of the worst aspects of a battle, not wanting to relive the fear, sounds, sights, and smells that retelling it would bring back. "Afterwards, I was returning with my comrades to our lines across the field when my horse shied. I found Alex on the field."

I felt my stomach start to churn at the memory, but took a mouthful of the strong spirits and steeled myself to continue. "He was under two fallen comrades and wedged against a boulder. The first soldier was badly gut shot, and when I removed him, the next was lying face first above him. When I rolled him off Alex, I discovered that the top of his head and left cheek had been shot off completely." I shuddered at the memory of that one sightless dull eye looking up at me from the shattered bone, blood and brain that surrounded it. I knew the sight haunted Alex, who had spent so many hours trapped face to face with such horror. "Alex was injured, and in shock. I took him back to camp where my commander put him in my charge."

"So, Alex is your prisoner?"

"Well, he was. Until he repaid the favour and saved my life."

I would have continued, but the door was suddenly flung open and Margaret rushed into the drawing room. Her gown was water stained and she looked somewhat dishevelled, strands of hair escaping from her previously neatly coiffed bun.

“Alex?” I asked, rising to my feet with an unexpected feeling of anxiety.

“Margaret, what’s the matter?” Robert asked at the same time.

“Homer asked me to fetch you both. There’s a problem with the young man and we need you.”

Margaret turned and left as quickly as she’d arrived, giving us no option but to follow as she hiked up her skirts, raced up the staircase and along the passageway to a closed door, which she flung open with very little care.

I followed Robert through the door and was at once hit by a blast of stifling hot air. In the centre of the room stood a large, wooden-framed bed in which Alex was lying. On the far side, Homer was bent over the mattress. He held onto Alex’s shoulders as he thrashed around beneath a pile of heavy blankets which covered him.

“What’s going on? Margaret said there was a problem,” Robert asked.

“He’s delirious,” Homer replied shortly. “I need to break the fever if he’s to recover his senses. But he’s having some sort of attack. Help me hold him down.”

“No, not like that,” I declared, as I pushed past and hurried to the bedside. Shocked, probably by my rudeness, Homer stood up. As he did, he released his grip on Alex, whose struggles became wilder.

“What do you think you are doing?” he demanded.

I didn’t answer. Instead, in one sweep, I pulled the layers of thick blankets back and dropped them on the end of the bed. Alex looked small as he lay in the centre of the mattress, clad only in a white linen shift that was rucked up around his thighs. The lower part of his right leg was swathed in a thick bandage. Even without the weight of the blankets, he continued to writhe on the bed, as though fighting an invisible enemy. I gave no thought to appearances or audience as I climbed onto the bed with him.

“Alex, can you hear me? It’s Iain.” I reached towards him, laying my hand on his stubble covered cheek.

His breath came in fast, shallow gasps. Despite the red flush that had developed from his exertions, his skin remained chilled and dry as parchment. Wriggling closer, and continuing to speak to him softly, I tucked one arm under his neck. The other I laid lightly over his chest. I could feel the frantic beating of his heart under his ribcage.

“It’s all right, you’re safe. Come back to me.”

Gradually, Alex’s struggles lessened, though his body continued to shake. His heartbeat began to slow and his breathing eased. Eventually he turned his face towards me and opened his eyes.

“Are you back with us?” I asked, gently moving my hand up from his chest to brush against his jaw.

“I think so.” He nodded. “I was back there, under their bodies. I couldn’t move.” His body began to tremble violently as he spoke.

“Hush now, *mo charaid*, you’re safe now.”

The tremors that ran through Alex’s body slowly began to ease as he lay there in my arms. Eventually his eyes closed and his heart rate slowed. Homer leaned forward and gently took hold of his wrist.

“He seems to be sleeping naturally now. We need to keep him warm though. These fevers will cycle, first chills then high temperatures, unless we can break it.”

“That’s fine, but you can’t cover him up so heavily that he can’t move.”

“Who are you to tell me how to treat a patient?” Homer bristled with indignation.

“I’m his friend, and the person who pulled him from a battlefield,” I replied shortly.

“Well really, I must insist—”

“Homer, we’ve plenty of stones we can warm in the fire then wrap in cloth and put around him. Would that help?” Robert suggested.

“Well, it won’t be as efficient, but I guess it will have to do.”

“Very good, I will get Finlay to fetch them.” As Robert went to leave, I slipped my arm out from beneath Alex and began to sit up, in order to get off the bed. “No,” Robert said gently to me. “Stay with him, he might need you.”

Before lying back down, I bent and removed my stiff leather riding boots. Alex remained marooned in the centre of the bed, and I sat carefully next to him. We’d spent the best part of three days in the shepherd’s hut curled up together in a makeshift bed, but with an audience of the apothecary and his wife it was different, and I didn’t dare do as I suddenly found I wished to, and actually take Alex’s sleeping form into my arms.

“How is his leg?” I asked once I was settled.

“I’ve lanced the infected flesh around the wound and cleaned it up,” Homer said briskly in a very professional tone. “Then I’ve packed it with some muslin soaked in good heather honey and some drops of distilled lavender essence. It’s not a deep wound, and once the infection clears it should heal well, though it will leave a scar. Margaret has also made an infusion of feverfew.” He indicated the small china teapot on the table by the bed. “I’d like him to try and drink a small amount every hour or so. That should help break the fever. Next time he wakes he needs to try and eat something too. He’s very weak. It’s extremely lucky you found help when you did.”

“I know,” I said softly. “Thank you for helping. I am very grateful for all you’ve done.”

“It’s my duty,” Homer said with a sniff. “I’ll go and speak to Mrs Douglas about some thin sweetened porridge.”

“That husband of mine has never dealt with thanks well,” Margaret said with a slight shake of her head as he left the room. “Do you think he’d tolerate one of the light blankets over him?”

“Possibly, though if I stay with him maybe even a heavier one.”

“That would be preferable. We’ll wait for Fin to bring those stones then draw up the coverlet. Do you want to change out of those clothes?”

I looked between Margaret and Alex, and then down at my travel-worn attire. My shirt, beneath the leather jerkin, was badly stained and wrinkled. My kilt was still damp at the hem, and in places the tartan pattern could barely be made out for the mud that stained it. I didn’t want to look at the thick woollen socks that I’d been wearing under my boots for rather longer than I cared to recall. A change of clothing would be welcome, but I didn’t want to leave Alex.

“I’ll go fetch you a nightgown and banyan. You can change in here,” she said, seeming to understand my unspoken dilemma.

I watched Alex as I waited. His skin was still pale, but had lost the fevered flush over his cheeks. His breathing was easy, with the occasional light snore, which made me smile. The tremors had stopped completely, but he was still restless. Occasionally his arm would reach out, as though searching for something, or he would toss his head as he muttered inaudibly. The only time he flinched and approached waking was when he moved his leg, which obviously still pained him.

Margaret returned carrying the promised sleepwear. Behind her trailed Finlay, carrying an armful of smooth grey stones, each somewhat larger than a closed fist, which he carefully laid into the open hearth to warm.

“Here you are, Iain.” She dropped the linen garment on the end of the bed. “I am sure that between them the men of the house will find something clean for you to wear tomorrow. I’ll leave you to change. Finlay will wrap the stones in a couple of those blankets when they are warmed through. Either Homer or I will pop back in an hour or so to check on Alex. In the meantime, should he wake, try and get a few drops of the feverfew into him.”

“Thank you, Margaret,” I said gratefully.

“You’re welcome, laddie.”

She left the room and I swung my legs off the bed to sit on the edge. Carefully I lifted the tartan from over my shoulder and undid the buttons on my waistcoat, before shrugging out of it. Beneath, my shirt was filthier than I’d realised, and as I lifted it over my head the warm, dry heat that radiated from the fire felt good against my bare skin. Checking that Finlay remained in front of the fire with his back to me, I undid the belt around my waist and lay my sporran on the floor by the bed before unfastening the heavy woollen kilt and letting it fall to the ground. I shrugged into the nightgown and tugged it down past my knees.

“All set there then?” Finlay asked, finally turning around, as though some sixth sense had told him I’d finished changing.

“Just about,” I replied as I leant down to peel off my socks before I returned to the bed.

Finlay carefully laid out one of the blankets on the opposite side of the bed and lay four stones along its length before twisting the fabric around them and pushing them across the mattress, closer to Alex. He repeated the process with a further three stones, which he laid at the end of the bed at Alex’s feet.

“That should do,” he said with a nod when he’d finished.

“Thank you,” I replied as I reached down to pull up one of the blankets to cover us. Finlay took it from me and settled it around us with an almost paternal air.

“Robert has retired for the night, and I am away to my bed now as well. There’s a water closet next door should you need it. Sleep well now.” He rested his hand on my shoulder and gripped firmly before leaving us alone.

I turned out the small oil lamp, which was burning next to the bed, leaving the flickering flames of the fire to light the room. Carefully, trying not to disturb Alex, I turned onto my side facing him and gently reached out my arm and laid it gently over his chest. It wasn't long before tiredness overtook me and I fell deeply asleep.

My sleep was not undisturbed. After a short while, I was woken as Alex's temperature spiked and he began to fight with the blankets covering him, pushing me away from his sweating body. I held him close until he calmed and fell back to sleep. Margaret came in soon after, waking him and making him drink some of the feverfew tonic that she'd brewed. It seemed to help for a while, and I drifted off again. The next time I woke Alex was clinging to me in his sleep, his teeth chattering as he shivered. I slid out carefully from under the blanket and went to build up the fire again and reheat a couple of the warming stones.

Shortly after Margaret's third visit to check on Alex, in the early hours of the morning, Alex's fever spiked again. His restless thrashing became more violent as he threw the blankets covering us, even managing to kick one of the heavy stones off the bed. The loud crash brought not only Margaret, but Homer and Finlay to check on us.

"I think the fever may break this time," Homer advised after a quick examination. "His colour is high, and he's beginning to sweat now. Finlay, we don't need you for anything but to build that fire up higher; we need to keep the heat up. Margaret, try to get some more of that feverfew into him."

As Alex continued to toss and turn, Homer and I had to hold his arms while Margaret dribbled a few drops of the liquid into the corner of his mouth. He swallowed automatically as the liquid filled his mouth, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. Eventually he stilled, and seemed to fall back into a more natural sleep.

"It's nigh on daybreak. We'll see how he's doing in the next hour or two. If the fever does break, he'll be on the road to recovery. Chances are, if all the infection has been removed, he'll be up and about by suppertime, though he may need a stick to walk." Homer seemed quite pleased with himself as he spoke. "We'll be back to check on him later. Come, Margaret. Let us return to our beds."

"There is a room made up for you just down the corridor," Finlay advised me as Homer swept Margaret before him out of the door. "If you want, that is."

“Thank you, I...” I began, before stopping, undecided as to what I wanted to do.

“Aye, lad, I thought as much.” Finlay clapped me on the shoulder and gave a sharp nod. “Stay here and watch over him.”

I lay back down on the soft mattress; as it dipped, Alex rolled towards me. I was confused. I knew I should have gone to my own room, but I didn’t want to leave him. I tried to rationalise my feelings. This man was my prisoner. I was responsible for his well-being. I had a duty and I was fulfilling it as I had been commanded. But while I told myself this in the silence of my mind, my heart was indicating that there may be other reasons for my desire not to leave him, and those feelings rather frightened me.

I must have fallen asleep again, because the next time I opened my eyes weak winter sunlight streamed through the window. I turned to check on Alex and found he was sleeping easily. The blankets had been kicked off again and his nightshirt was damp with sweat. I placed my hand on his forehead and swept back the scattered hair that lay over it; the skin was clammy, the hair wet. I sighed with relief. It looked as though the fever had broken and the worst was now over.

A quiet knock on the door made me roll away from him and sit up, grabbing at one of the blankets that had slipped off the bed and quickly covering us. A young servant came into the room, carrying a pitcher of hot water that steamed in the cool morning air. Over one arm, she carried a small pile of clothing. The pitcher she placed next to the large ceramic bowl and grooming kit on the washstand; the clothes she draped over a nearby chair.

“Good morning,” I said politely.

“*Madainn mhath*,” she replied with a small bob of the head. “Master Robert sent up the clothes for you, and Master Homer said that he’ll be up to see the patient shortly.”

“Thank you. Where can I find them?”

“They’re in the morning room taking breakfast, sir.”

There wasn’t enough water for me to clean all of the dirt I’d picked up over the last few days from my body, but I removed as much as I could. Both water and cloth when I’d finished were an unsavoury shade of brown. A razor had been left next to the bowl, so I took time removing about a week’s growth of scratchy coarse hair that covered my chin and cheeks. I looked through the

clothes I'd been provided with, selecting a pair of plain black breeches and a heavy white linen shirt. I passed over the rather fancy tailored overcoat in favour of my own leather waistcoat and somewhat improperly forewent the neck cloth entirely. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I pulled on a long pair of stout woollen stockings before my boots.

Alex was still deeply asleep when I left him and made my way downstairs to find my host. The morning room was east facing, getting the best of the morning light. Again the furniture was plain and clearly intended for comfort. Finlay rose from the table around which they were sitting as I entered.

"Tain, come and take a seat. Help yourself to some porridge. You must be hungry."

He ushered me to his own seat, removing the bowl he'd been using and replacing it with a fresh one. I helped myself to the thick, hot oatmeal, lacing it with a spoonful of honey and a splash of rich cream from the jug on the table.

"How is Alex this morning?" Robert enquired as he poured milk into the beaker in front of me.

"I think the fever broke during the night. He was sleeping easily when I got up." I looked to Homer as I continued. "Does that mean the worst is over?"

"Maybe," he replied without commitment.

"We'll go up and check on him when we've finished breakfast," Margaret added. "He'll not be going anywhere for a while. He needs rest and warmth for a few days."

"I'm sorry we are intruding on you like this."

"Don't think anything of it, lad," Robert replied. "We've plenty of room and food enough for all. I wouldn't turn a stray dog out in this season. Much the best thing for you both to get your strength back before you make any decisions about what you do next."

Next. Yes, that was the big question. The unspoken agreement that Alex and I had reached, that we were done with this war and deserted our respective armies, weighed heavily on my mind. I couldn't for the life of me make myself think that it was wrong. This didn't feel like my war, and I was sick of the road and the life of a soldier. Though I didn't have any idea what we should do next, or where we should go. Desertion was a serious matter, the punishment severe if caught, particularly for Alex who was under the command of the Duke of Cumberland with English law behind him.

“I said don’t think of it,” Robert said gently, laying his hand on my arm. “Eat that before it gets cold.”

I tried to put my worries from my mind while I ate, but all the time kept coming back to ask myself what were we going to do next.

With breakfast over, no one dawdled at the table. We all stood as a stout, middle-aged, very capable-looking woman entered with the servant whom I’d met earlier trailing behind her.

“Thank you, Mrs Douglas. We’re finished if you’d like to clear.” Robert tried to make it sound like the confirmation of an order, and I had to smother a laugh. Quite clearly, he was not the one in charge of the situation. While she directed the servant to pick up dishes and tidy the room, Homer and Margaret excused themselves to go check on Alex.

“No, we’ll call you if we need you,” Margaret told me firmly as I went to follow.

Instead I trailed Robert from the morning room to the doorway of a small estate office, at the centre of which was a large desk on which papers were piled haphazardly.

“I’m afraid I need to look at some legal documents this morning. I won’t be much company. Finlay is going out to a couple of tenant farms we have in the glen, to deliver some cured meats and look into a complaint made by one of the farmers, if you would rather go with him?”

“Thank you, but if you could direct me to the stables? I’d like to check on Bran.”

“Of course. Finlay will show you the way.”

The stables were clearly newly built. Housed in a large stone building to the rear of the castle, the interior was split into six stalls, four of which were occupied. Bran, separated from the others by an empty stall, whinnied loudly as I entered. The sudden noise brought a stable lad, barely in his teens, out from one of the other stables.

“Can I help? Do you want me to saddle him for you?” he asked.

“Thank you, no, I am just visiting. We aren’t going anywhere today. But do you have brushes and a hoof pick I could borrow?”

He ducked back into the stall and returned seconds later holding out the items I’d requested before disappearing again to his work.

I walked down the centre of the stable to where Bran stood with his head over the top of the stall.

“Hey, boy,” I said as I reached up to pat his neck. He lipped at my shoulder in response as I fought the stiff catch on the door and let myself in. He was hock-deep in thick, clean straw. A large bucket of water stood in the corner of the stall, under it an almost empty hayrack. He had obviously been well treated overnight, but he was thinner than I would like and his coat bore signs of the hardship of the last few weeks.

I began with the stiff brush, carefully laying long strokes along the line of his back and over his croup on one side, before changing to the other. Bran started off fidgeting as I worked, but soon he was leaning into the brush and on occasion against me. As I brushed, I talked, a long-standing habit I’d been doing for as long as I’d owned him. My life had never been difficult; my parents weren’t that strict and when I started work alongside my father on the land, he hadn’t been a harsh taskmaster, nor was our clan chief. But Bran knew all my secrets, my hopes, my fears. Not that he could talk back or give me advice. The only sign that he actually listened to a word I said was the occasional flick of his ears, though on occasion when he thought there was too much talk and not enough attention he’d headbutt me, or worse.

Talking quietly, I told him about where we were, our hosts and how they were looking after Alex. He snorted gently when I stopped grooming to lay my head against the now shining coat on his neck, thinking about Alex.

“I don’t know what to do, Bran,” I whispered eventually. “If... when he recovers. I mean technically he’s still my prisoner, my enemy. But we’ve both deserted. It’s not so much an issue for him, as he was taken, but for me? If I am held for court martial, what will they do to him? Calum was all for simply running him through when I bought him back to camp, it was only Chief Euan that prevented it. Without either of us there, I don’t know.

“I am so tired of fighting, of being on the road. I want to go home, but that isn’t possible, not whilst this war continues.” I paused, thinking of what else I wanted as I brushed down the closest of Bran’s forelegs. Dropping the brush into the straw, I reached for the hoof pick before running my hand down his pastern and picking up the hoof. I carefully teased away the packed-in dirt that had filled it before ducking under Bran’s chin and reaching for the other hoof. I was just finishing when he moved suddenly; it was an old habit, but I wasn’t quick enough to get out the way, and he sank his teeth into the flesh of my backside.

“What was that for,” I demanded, dropping the pick and rubbing the now tender patch where the large teeth had nipped. He whickered and pushed my shoulder with his head. “No, it’s not funny,” I scolded, tapping him lightly on the nose. He shook his head and stamped lightly with his hoof, making me step back in fear for my toes. “Don’t start. I’ve still got your hindquarters to finish. If you are going to play up, I’ll tether you to the wall.” Bran snorted again, but turned away and began nibbling on the remaining hay in the hayrack as I picked up the brush again.

“Do you miss home?” I asked as I started to take the dirt out of the coat over his hindquarters. “I do. I miss the mountains, and the forests. I’ll admit, I’m glad that I’ve seen more of England than I ever thought I’d see, but I’m *cianalas*. I want to see deer high up on the fells and watch eagles dance in the morning sky. I want to show Alex all these things, take him riding up the glen, watch the salmon leap, stand by the Falls of Moness and feel the power of the water.”

“I’d like you to show me all those things too.”

I jumped at the sound of Alex’s voice from the door of the stall. I stood from where I was bent over brushing out Bran’s hocks and moved behind him. Alex was leaning against the wooden doorframe, still dressed in just the nightshirt he’d been wearing before. His right calf was swathed in a clean bandage and he rested on a stout kebbie. He still looked pale, but his eyes were bright and his lips twitched into a smile.

“How long have you been there?” I asked, moving around behind Bran.

“A while,” he admitted moving towards me.

“You heard...”

“Enough,” he confirmed, moving closer. He leant heavily on the walking stick when he reached me. We stood facing each other, neither saying a word. I looked into his eyes, as he looked into mine. My mouth had gone dry. Suddenly Bran flicked his tail and stamped heavily with his rear hoof. Without thinking, I reached out to Alex and took hold of his arms, just above the elbow, and pulled him towards me, even as I stepped back out of range of Bran’s hindquarters, which I knew from experience could deliver a hefty and bruising kick.

Alex’s stick clattered to the ground as we moved. I found myself pinned against the wall of the stall, Alex’s body against mine. I grasped his shoulders as he leant forward, his hands on the wood at my back. We hadn’t broken eye

contact. I could smell the feverfew tea on his breath, the faint salt tang of sweat on his skin. Without making a conscious decision, my right hand moved higher, feeling the fluttering pulse on his neck as my palm brushed past it and cupped his stubble-covered chin.

“Iain.” He seemed to breathe my name rather than speak it as he pushed further forward into me.

I wasn’t sure who made the first move. His lips weren’t cold at all as they pressed against mine. My hand slipped behind his head and tangled in his hair as I held him. I felt one of his hands tug gently on my shirt, then slip beneath the fabric. I gave a slight yelp and twitched away as his cold hand brushed against my bare skin. Alex’s mouth opened, and I found myself responding in kind as our lips moved against each other’s. In the back of my mind I knew that this wasn’t right, that we should stop, but my body overrode any objections.

As I went to speak, I instead found myself making only a small gasping sound as Alex’s tongue darted into my mouth for the first time and touched mine. My body seemed to understand what was happening as I accepted him into my mouth. His tongue flicked over my teeth, dragged across the roof of my mouth, and tangled with my own tongue. Cautiously I pushed my tongue into his mouth to begin my own exploration. As I did, his hand had moved round to the small of my back and rubbed gentle circles on the skin there. I tugged gently on his hair as our kisses deepened. His eyes fluttered then closed as he groaned. I pulled away slightly breaking our kiss.

“Are you all right?” I asked, thinking of his leg.

“More than all right.” As though to confirm this, he pushed his groin against my thigh and ground the hard bulge under his nightshift against my thigh. This time it was me that groaned. My own *gogan* was fully swollen, pushing against the placket of my breeches, my balls hung heavy beneath it. We continued to kiss even as we rutted against each other, mindless of our surroundings or the impropriety and risk in what we were doing.

“Alex, Alex. Dammit, lad, where the hell are you?” Homer’s irate voice from the door of the stables tore us apart. Both of us were breathing heavily. Alex’s face was flushed and his lips slightly swollen, I put my hand to my mouth to feel if my own were in a similar state. Hearing footsteps approaching outside the stall, Alex pulled away from me, and I hastily rearranged my shirt, so it hung down over the bulge in my breeches. I reached down into the hay for Alex’s walking stick and thrust it towards him as Homer reached the doorway.

“Ach, what on earth are you doing? I said you could try walking around the room, not go gadding about outside in the middle of December in no more than your nightshift. You’ve not even any boots on,” Homer scolded.

“I’m sorry,” Alex began, but Homer didn’t let him continue.

“I didn’t spend my time and talents in treating that leg of yours and the delirium you were in, just to have you come down with something worse for being such a stupid *burraidh*. Come on now, back inside with you.”

Alex gave me a rueful smile as Homer chivvied him out of the stall, all the while admonishing him for his stupid behaviour. Left alone in the stable, I picked up the brush again, but simply held it, turning it over in my hand as my mind replayed what we’d just been doing. Sure I’d kissed a few girls in the past, even taken a couple to bed, but save for in a flash of heat, I’d never really felt anything for them more than a brotherly affection. This felt different. I finally understood what my brother had meant when he talked about that special spark, that lit a fire in your groin, from kissing the right person. Only Alex was another man; how could he be the right person for me?

I estimated it must be sometime after midday when I finally emerged from the stables, leaving Bran enjoying a large pan of oats. I had been worried about the amount we were costing our hosts, but the stable boy had insisted that Sir Robert had given orders that my horse was to be well fed. The sun still shone, but there was no warmth in the air and the wind had risen again, stinging my cheeks as I crossed the courtyard to return to the house.

There was no one in the morning room or estate office as I went past. I considered going up to Alex’s room, but as I stood at the bottom of the staircase, the main door opened behind me.

“Ah, Iain. All done in the stable? How is your horse holding up?” Robert asked as he entered the house. Margaret followed him, unfastening the ribbon that tied on her bonnet.

“He’s fine, thank you. Your grooms made sure he was comfortable and he’s certainly well fed. He needs a few days’ rest I’m afraid. I am not sure how we are to pay you for all of this.”

“Don’t worry about it. It isn’t a problem. You are all welcome here for as long as it takes you to recover.” Robert clapped his hand against my back in a paternal fashion as he spoke. “Come now, we’ll go get ourselves a drink from Mrs Douglas.”

“And annoy her, I’ve no doubt,” Margaret added with a raised eyebrow.

“Would I do that?” Robert’s mock innocence wouldn’t have fooled anyone, and Margaret just rolled her eyes in response.

“I should go check on Alex,” I ventured.

“I’ll go up and see whether he’s well enough for visitors,” Margaret cautioned before heading upstairs without waiting for my response. I blushed, remembering all too easily what he’d been well enough to do earlier.

Mrs Douglas’ domain was a large, well-furnished and stocked kitchen warmed by the large fire chamber stove. The kitchen smelled of roasting meat and for some reason apples, which made my stomach growl and my mouth water. One of the servants was scrubbing dishes in a bucket at one side of the room. Mrs Douglas herself was standing beside a large table on which was laid out an array of vegetables.

“What do you want, Robbie?” She looked up and frowned at us as we entered the room.

“Something to drink, if that wouldn’t be too much trouble, Mrs Douglas.”

“There’s a pail of milk in the cold pantry that’s been skimmed off. You can help yourselves, then get out of my kitchen. I need to get on with preparing tonight’s meal.” She nodded her head in the direction of a small door at the opposite end of the room.

I followed Robert as he passed the dresser and picked up a couple of mugs, which he carried to the cold pantry.

“You’ll have to excuse her,” Robert said quietly as he dipped the ladle into the pail and filled the mugs. “She’s been the housekeeper here since I was a lad, and she’s never quite got it into her head that I’m not still ten years old.”

“Thank you,” I said with a smile as I took the full beaker from him and sipped from it.

“I know it’s not fashionable to drink milk, but we’ve always plenty as it comes from our own herd. Mrs Douglas doesn’t approve of whisky, wine or beer before dinner time I’m afraid,” he added as we left the kitchen.

“What time is dinner time?” I asked, as we walked back towards the drawing room, not least because the direction my thoughts kept going, I could really do with a wee dram.

“Our main meal is usually around four in the afternoon, but it will be later tonight, as we’ve to have a special meal. Nothing too fancy; we aren’t celebrating Christmas in any popish way,” he sought to assure me. “But it’s one of those events where we dress for dinner. And we’ll light the Yule log at the start of the meal and keep it burning till Twelfth Night.”

“Dress for dinner?”

“Aye, full tartan,” Robert confirmed with a nod. I frowned; save for the borrowed outfit I wore, the only clothes I had were the travel-worn kilt, tartan and shirt I’d been wearing yesterday. And the day before, and the week before that. Robert suddenly laughed. “You should see your face, laddie. You aren’t to worry, we’ve plenty of spare clothing, though I doubt we’ve anything of the MacPherson tartan, or MacDonell for that matter, if Alex is well enough to join us.” He paused and took a large gulp of his drink while I continued to sip at mine. “Tell you what.” He lowered his mug. He’d a moustache of milk on his upper lip. “I’ll dig out some clothes for you both while you nip up and see Alex. I can tell he is on your mind.”

I left Robert by the door of the estate office and headed up the stairs. In my imagination, I felt the eyes of Auld Lagg watching me with stern disapproval. Knocking on the door of Alex’s room, I let myself in without waiting for a response. He was sitting up in bed, propped against a stack of pillows behind him. Although he still looked a little pale, the smile he gave me was radiant.

“How are you feeling?” I asked as I approached. Homer, who had been measuring out a tincture of some pale yellow liquid in a glass dropper, turned at my question.

“He’d be a lot better if he hadn’t been gallivanting about the stables in just an undershirt,” he said crossly. “We’re waiting to see if he takes a chill again. The more he taxes his system without proper rest, the slower he’ll recover.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t encourage him.” I tried to mollify him.

“Creep,” Alex mouthed the word at me behind Homer’s back, and I had to hide a grin.

“Anyway,” he continued, “he seems none the worse for now. Margaret is arranging for some water to be brought up so he can clean up. He’s decided he’s going to join us for dinner.” There was an air of disapproval in those words.

“I’m well enough for that,” Alex assured him, but only got a disgruntled huff in return while he carefully dropped the contents of the measure into a glass of water.

“Drink that, slowly, over the next hour and we’ll see.”

“Thank you.” He took the glass from him and sniffed, the wrinkling of his nose indicated that the medicine smelt vile.

The door opened, admitting two servants, both of whom carried large jugs of steaming water. Margaret, who was laden with two thick towels and a couple of smaller washcloths, followed behind them.

“Put the jugs down here next to the bed, and pull the washstand closer,” Margaret ordered. The two servants dutifully carried out the task before she dismissed them. “Now, let’s see about this bath.”

“I can wash myself.” Alex pushed back the blanket that was covering him as he spoke and rose to his feet. He staggered as he tried to get his balance and sat back heavily again on the bed.

“You can barely stand, lad. Never mind trying to run before you can walk,” Homer said sternly.

“I’m not being difficult, but I don’t think it would be right for Margaret to bathe me.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” Margaret replied.

“I’ve had to bathe a patient or two in my time,” Homer said. “It’s not like you’ve got anything I’ve not seen before.” Alex looked horrified by the prospect and opened his mouth to reply, but I cut him off before he could speak.

“May I help? I could bathe him.” The words were out of my mouth before I realised what I was offering. It was all very well for a physician to assist in bathing a patient, but two unrelated gentlemen would not usually perform such an intimate service for each other.

Margaret looked between the pair of us and then gave a slight smile, which she tried to hide almost immediately. “I think that would be a good idea,” she said and started to replace the small vials into the box of herbs and medicines she usually carried. “Homer, shall we leave these two young men alone.” She ushered him in front of her as she moved to the door.

“Yes, dear,” Homer replied weakly and, with a final glance backward at us, left the room.

I reached for one of the large towels and shook it out.

“How do you want to do this?” I asked. “We don’t want to get the bed wet, so perhaps we could lay one of these sheets under you.”

Alex remained seated at the edge of the bed, glaring at me. “I can manage,” he repeated stubbornly.

“No, you can’t.” I laid out the towel in the centre of the bed as I spoke. “Come on, take that nightshirt off. It’s ripe with sweat and muck from the stable. Your feet are almost black. Lie back, Alex. Let me do this for you.” Thinking he might be embarrassed, I dropped the second towel into his lap and added, “I’ll turn my back while you change, then you can cover your private parts and tell me when you’re ready.”

As good as my word, I turned around. For a while there was no sound from him, but I could almost feel the anger he was directing towards me. Then he sighed deeply and I heard the rustle of fabric as he removed the nightshirt and dropped it to the floor. The bed frame creaked and then silence.

“Are you ready?”

“I suppose,” he said sullenly.

I turned. He lay, as requested, on the towel in the centre of the bed. His head and shoulders were raised slightly by the pillows. His dark hair was longer than was fashionable and hung loosely round his head. His skin was unexpectedly pale, accentuated by the small patch of dark hair that ran down the slight hollow of his breastbone and surrounded the dusky pink skin of his nipples. From waist to knee he was carefully covered by the towel; his right leg was heavily bandaged, but his left was covered in short coarse hair. His feet really were filthy.

I placed one of the jugs of water next to the hearth to keep warm; the other I poured into the large ceramic bowl on the washstand.

“Shall I start with your face and neck and work down?” I asked, dipping the cloth into the warm water and wringing it out slightly. Alex shrugged in resignation and turned his head away from me.

I sat gently on the edge of the bed and took his hand that was closer in mine. His hands were not overly large, but his fingers were long, ending in blunt cut nails. There were small calluses on his palm: evidence that he worked for a living. I carefully washed away the dirt, refreshing the cloth and moving slowly

up the well-muscled arms. When I reached his shoulder, I lifted the arm so it lay next to Alex's head. Leaning forward over him, I could smell the sweat of his underarms, strong but not unpleasantly so. It was a very personal smell, and one I knew well. It was the scent that I had breathed in as we rode, as I held him in my arms in front of me. I had a sudden urge to bend further over him, to put my nose to his armpit and inhale. Instead, I wiped away the dirt and quickly put his arm back down against his side before I could act on my unacceptable impulse.

I refreshed the cloth once more and ran it gently across from shoulder to neck, and then up towards his hairline. As I brought the cloth back down and moved to the front of his neck, Alex turned his head towards me. I was startled to see tears in his eyes.

"Sorry," he whispered.

I smiled and shook my head; there was nothing for him to apologise for. To be washed like this must have been humiliating for him and his reaction was understandable.

I gently washed down one side of his chest, fascinated by the way the darker skin of his nipple went from flat to peaked as the cloth ran across it. His stomach was flat. I traced the shallow ridges of muscle on the side closest to me, as they disappeared under the thickening pelt of dark hair towards the top of the towel. I dropped the cloth into the bowl and carried it carefully around to the other side of the bed, where I repeated my gentle cleansing of Alex's skin.

"Do you want me to shave you now? Or do your back first?"

He looked up at me, his bottom lip caught in his teeth. His eyes had dried, but his skin was slightly flushed. I put the back of my hand to his forehead, but there was no sign of the fever returning.

"Let's shave you," I decided when he remained silent.

I had used the small shaving kit myself that morning and left it on the washstand. I carefully prepared the badger bristle brush, before gently swirling the lather over Alex's chin, cheeks and neck.

"Hold steady," I cautioned, reaching for the razor.

The blade was long and sharp. I set it carefully against Alex's cheek and began slowly to sweep downwards towards his chin, taking off both soap and hair before wiping the blade clean on the washcloth and starting over. When his

cheeks were clean shaven, I moved to his chin, uncovering a dimple just off centre. With small delicate flicks of the blade, I removed the hair from above his top lip before moving under his chin and down his neck. As I placed the razor, I watched his Adam's apple move as he swallowed.

"I'll be careful." With swift, light strokes I stripped the hair away from his throat.

Placing the razor back on the washstand, I picked up the clean cloth and wet it, before wiping away the last of the soap. Then I slowly ran my hand over the freshly shaved skin, lingering to cup his chin and rub my thumb across the skin above his top lip. I was checking I had removed all the hair, or so I told myself, denying that it was just an excuse to touch him. I didn't dare look up into his eyes, too afraid he would see in them that what I really wanted to do: lean down and taste that now bare skin and to kiss him again.

"Turn over so I can wash your back." The words came out more roughly than I'd intended. Standing, I went and collected the fresh jug of water from the fireplace. Rather than tipping it into the dirty water in the basin, I simply dipped the clean washcloth into the jug and turned back to the bed.

Alex had rolled onto his front as I'd requested, but he'd not bothered with the towel this time. My breath caught in my throat as I looked him up and down. He'd tucked his arms under the pillow and rested with his head turned away from me. Broad shoulders with well-defined muscles ran down into a narrower waist. There was a dip in the centre of his back, before the gentle rise to a taut backside. There were slight indents on either side of the mounds of his arse and a deep cleft between them. The skin was unblemished. I could see the lines of muscle in his lightly furred thighs, running down towards small hollows at the back of his knees and, from what I could see of his left leg, continuing down the calf.

I gradually washed over the broad expanse of skin, taking care to clean away the sweat and dirt. Gently I ran the cloth over the globes of his arse, dipping briefly into his crack and paying attention to the join with his thighs. He moaned as I began to move down to wash his leg. Immediately I lifted my hands.

"Sorry, did I hurt you?"

"No, it's all right." His voice sounded hoarse but not as though he was in pain, so I continued. When I reached his feet, I rinsed out the first cloth and began to remove the worst of the dirt.

“Roll over for me again, so I can finish your front.” I turned away to drop the old cloth back into the washbasin and refreshed the cleaner one with the warmer water as I spoke. When I turned back, Alex was again lying on his back, with nothing to hide his modesty. Instead he lay with his legs slightly parted, his left knee drawn up slightly as though inviting me to look.

My eyes were immediately drawn to his groin. The hair on his stomach darkened, and did indeed grow thicker, as it reached his cock, which stood, partially erect, in a small bush of almost black hair. Beneath that, his balls lay against his leg, fully round and lightly covered in the same dark hair.

My eyes darted up to meet his. There was no sign of tears now; his eyes sparkled with mischief, a small smirk graced his lips. Without his scruffy beard, he appeared much younger.

I looked away quickly and busied myself with the wet cloth, cleaning from his foot upwards. I kept my eyes averted as I cleansed the skin of his legs, my hand moving ever closer to his privates. As I gently wiped the dirt from his thigh, the back of my hand brushed the wrinkled skin of his balls. A shudder ran through Alex, and my eyes automatically flicked up to his face. He was still watching me, but the smirk was gone now and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Keeping my eyes on him, I refreshed the cloth and deliberately this time ran it across the bottom of his ballsac.

My own dick had started to harden. I fidgeted to try and relieve the pressure where it was pressed tight against the front of my breeches. I'd seen naked men before, usually my own brother and my friends when we swam in the loch in the summer. But I'd never touched them. It wasn't that I hadn't wanted to, but that it wasn't right. In my mind I could see us in the stable, me pressed up against the wall with Alex's body rutting against mine. I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted. Would we have ground against each other to completion? Would we have continued kissing? Would he have touched me?

He groaned, pulling me back to the present. I watched as, eyes now closed, he pressed his head back into the pillow and arched his back. His swollen shaft rose further from its nest of hair to stand proud above his stomach. Gently I lifted his balls and cleaned behind them, before wiping the cloth over each of the orbs. Letting them fall back to rest on his thigh, I wrapped the cloth round the base of his cock and very gently drew it up towards the knob end. The loose skin moved beneath the cloth as I dragged it along, pulling the foreskin up over

the head, then exposing it as I moved the cloth back down. Holding the shaft about halfway down, I took a corner of the cloth and gently wiped around the underside of the glans, before releasing the foreskin to cover it again.

“Iain,” Alex moaned. “Please?” I wasn’t entirely sure what he was asking and my confusion must have registered as I looked towards him. “Your hand, please. Use your hand,” he begged.

I laid the cloth to one side and then carefully grasped the bottom of the now fully erect shaft in my hand. It lay heavy against my palm, and for a moment, I wasn’t sure what to do. The only cock I’d ever held till now was my own. Slowly, I used my wrist to slide my hand up and down the shaft, each time exposing the cockhead, which now glistened with moisture.

“Yes,” Alex hissed. “Keep going, please.”

Running from base to tip on the underside of his dick was a thick vein, and I gently ran my thumb up and down, pressing slightly against it. I teased the thickened band at the base of the cockhead, pulling back the foreskin completely and rubbing lightly with my fingers. As the shaft hardened and grew in my hand, it felt like velvet over steel. Gathering some of the slippery fluid that expressed from the slit at the tip of the crown, I spread it around the head and down the rod.

“My balls, please, touch them.” Alex panted the words.

The desperation in his voice made me harden further. I looked up at him as I deliberately wriggled back slightly and, holding him in one hand, used the other to undo the placket of my breeches and push my small clothes to one side. My erect cock was leaking as I palmed it briefly, watching Alex the whole time. Alex’s eyes widened slightly. Slowly he ran his tongue around his lips, and this time it was me that moaned.

I removed my hand from my own shaft and cupped his balls, gently rolling them as I began to move my other hand again up and down his erection. I continued to fondle him, occasionally slipping my hand back behind his nutsac to tease the skin behind. Alex’s hips began to jerk as my hand sped up. A flush crept up the pale skin of his chest; he tossed his head from side to side against the pillow. I took my hand from his balls and placed it back on my own cock. In time, I continued sliding both my hands up and down.

We were both panting heavily when suddenly his dick seemed to expand, his entire pelvis lifted from the mattress, and he shuddered, spilling onto my

slicked fingers and splattering his seed over his stomach. The smell of his release tipped me over the edge. My balls tightened; I closed my eyes and released with a small yelp, semen spurting over his thighs. For a while, apart from the crackle of the fire, the only sound in the room was the hoarse gasps we both made as we recovered.

“Are you all right, *mo ghrádh*?” Alex pushed himself up onto his elbows and looked at me, concern written over his face.

I nodded and smiled at him, not ready to speak. I reached for the cloth and dipped it into the now cool water, before gently wiping away the evidence from his skin. My mind was a whirl. I should have been disgusted by what we’d done. Everything I’d ever learnt condemned two men touching each other. Men lay with women, they married women. Two men had no place together in this world as anything other than friends and comrades. Yet kissing him this morning and touching him just now—none of it felt wrong. A part of me wanted to run and hide from what I was starting to feel; another part of me wanted to crawl up his body and take him in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” he said eventually into the silence. “I shouldn’t have pushed you into doing that.”

“No, it is I who should apologise,” I said rather formally, looking at the mattress rather than at him. “You were put into my care and I have failed in my duty to behave in a civilised manner until hostilities were over and you could return to your home. I will speak to Sir Robert about your future care and arrange to return to my division.”

“No.” Alex sat up and took hold of my hands, where I was twisting the damp cloth between them. “Iain, don’t do this. You have done nothing wrong—nothing I didn’t ask you to.” Gently he raised one hand to cup my cheek. “I wanted this, believe me.”

“Have you... before, with someone else?” I stuttered.

“Yes. I’ve never been attracted to women. When I studied at university in Glasgow, there were other fellows who had the same inclinations. We had to be careful. We’d only meet occasionally and at all costs avoid the Sheriff. If both parties agree though, if both want it, I don’t see the harm.”

“But the law?”

“I know, but would you rather live alone? Or be joined with someone you cannot love and must lay with as a duty?”

As I thought about what he was asking, he shifted over to the side of the bed and pulled me forward until I fell against him. His arm crept around my shoulders and he held me as I turned my face into his chest.

“I’ve been with women, a couple anyway,” I said eventually. “But it never felt like this. It never felt right.”

“And this does?” He stroked my hair as he asked.

“Yes, very right.”

We’d dressed for dinner. Robert had been as good as his word and a fresh kilt with stiffly starched linen shirt and a tartan had been laid out on the bed in the room that had been set aside for me, which as yet I’d not spent any time in. The tartan wasn’t the blue I was used to, but the red and green of the MacGregor Clan, from which the Grierson family came. I adjusted my sporran so it hung neatly from the leather belt around my waist and pulled on my boots, which at some point during the day had been cleaned. When I stopped at Alex’s room to see if he was ready to go down, I found that he was also dressed in the same attire. He’d left the neck of his shirt open, showing a few of the short hairs on his chest. His leg was still bandaged and he was still leaning heavily on the walking stick, but he looked *eireachdail* none the less. As we made our way downstairs, I could see the pain he was suffering etched in his face with each step we descended.

The meal had been served in the formal dining room. The large, dark wood table that stood in the centre of the room was set for eight, with Mrs Douglas and her quietly spoken husband joining us for the meal. Before we ate we stood behind our chairs and Margaret offered a brief prayer which did nothing to reflect the fact that it was Christmas Day. There was no celebration of the festive season, nor had there been in Scotland since the Reformation. I’d never witnessed it myself, but my father used to tell us stories of great feasts and celebrations to mark the season.

Robert was a generous host. A whole smoked salmon was followed by a haunch of well-roasted venison. There was whisky and water to drink throughout the meal, though Homer strictly limited the amount Alex was allowed. Conversation was kept light, though probably not for the delicate sensibilities of the ladies present; if anything Margaret and Mrs Douglas were the most forthright in their views.

After the meal, feeling pleasantly full, Robert invited us to the drawing room. Where two chairs had stood before the fire last night, this evening there were four. Robert directed us to one side and took his own seat, the one closest to the fire, on the other. Shortly after, Finlay let himself into the room and took the other seat.

“How are you both feeling?” Robert asked as he poured a more generous measure of spirits for each of us. “Don’t tell Homer,” he added as he handed out the glasses.

“Much more rested,” Alex replied. “Homer looked at my leg before he redressed it this evening. He’s pleased that it seems to be healing well. He believes I may be able to ride in a few days.”

“That is good news. Though we shall have to do something about finding you a horse of your own. That poor horse of Iain’s can’t be expected to keep carrying both of you.”

“We can’t afford another mount,” I replied.

“Who said anything about paying? I’ve a stable of horses, many of which spend more time out at pasture than they do working. I am sure we can come to some arrangement. Though it isn’t something we need to think about for a few days.”

“What are your plans when you leave?” Finlay asked.

I looked towards Alex, unsure what to say. It wasn’t something we’d discussed.

“You must have some idea?”

“Not really,” I admitted, slouching back into the chair. “As you know, we were aiming for Lockerbie, where we hoped to find somewhere to stay for a while. But after that...” I finished with a shrug.

“You’d no plans to go home?”

“Not yet.” I paused, considering what to say next. I trusted our hosts, but I didn’t know where they stood in the current political turmoil. They’d made us guests in their house though, and I was sure that wasn’t just because it was the right thing to do in the circumstances. Eventually, I put my courage in my belief that these men would not hold our actions against us and added, “We, that is I, deserted.”

“We deserted,” Alex amended firmly.

“No,” I said shaking my head. “You can’t desert, not while you are held prisoner. My actions are all that matter here. I have a duty to keep you safe, and return you home when hostilities cease. But if I go home, my family will be shamed. They may disown me, or even turn me in to my clan chief. After all it is under his colours I am fighting for our prince.” I couldn’t help the bitterness I felt at the situation from creeping into my voice.

“So you intend to what? Keep on the move? Stay in hiding?”

“To be honest, I hadn’t thought that far. All I was worried about was finding help for Alex and somewhere warm and dry for a few nights.”

I risked a look towards Alex and found him looking back at me, a gentle smile on his face. “You are too hard on yourself,” he said quietly.

“What if we had a proposition for you?” Robert asked.

“What sort of proposition?” I countered, somewhat suspiciously.

“Somewhere to stay, for a while, maybe even until the current situation is over.” Robert swirled the contents of his glass as he spoke.

“Go on,” Alex prompted.

“Have you ever heard of the island of Ailsa Craig?”

“The smugglers’ island?”

“Aye, well some call it that,” Robert admitted. “The island itself has been owned by the Hamiltons as far back as records go, and it’s their castle that stands on the east side of the island. But, since Auld Lagg’s time, we’ve had a little land there. My grandfather built a shieling, just a couple of crofter’s cottages and a bit of land, which we use in the summer, but for the most part they stand empty. There are some cattle and sheep, a good well and enough grazing for a couple of horses. Boats come in regularly with other provisions, not just from Girvan but from Ireland and beyond. I won’t say there isn’t any contraband that gets left there from time to time, mind you.”

“What are you suggesting?” I asked.

“No one can say how long this war will last, or what the outcome will be. But it’s clear that neither of you want a part of it. I’m offering you a place to stay, a safe place. There aren’t many on the island, and it wouldn’t be unusual for two young men to, say, go make a start in life farming a small holding like that. You could stay as long as was needed or wanted to.”

“Why? Why are you offering us this?” Alex asked the question before I could.

“For that I will need to share some things about myself.” He looked towards Finlay as though asking an unspoken question. Finlay nodded in response, and at the same time reached out and took Robert’s hand. Alex and I stole a quick glance at each other; my own surprise was reflected in his face, but neither of us spoke.

“I was just fifteen when James Stewart began the last uprising. My family all took up the cause on the English side, and it cost us greatly. My uncles, Sir William, and his younger brother Gilbert, were both captured and imprisoned. My own father was accused, falsely, of counterfeiting coin and forging stamps and, like my uncles, spent time in gaol. In the meantime, I was left in the care of Auld Lagg himself.” Robert gave a shudder as though the memory pained him. “He was always harsh with his children and grandchildren, but with me it was worse. You see my parents had been suspected of apostasy, of returning to the Catholic faith, and he was determined to beat out of me what he called ‘any of that sort of nonsense’. I spent a lot of time in the kirk, under the tutelage of the minister, who wasn’t a tolerant man.

“It was also the year I fell in love for the first time. Unlike my friends though, it wasn’t some fair maiden who turned my head. No, I fell in love with the son of the steward here at Lag Castle. I followed him around like a lovesick puppy for most of that summer. How no one noticed I will never know. Fin kept his distance at first. He was an employee, and I the third in line for the baronetcy. But I was persistent, and one afternoon I persuaded him to take me out grouse shooting along the glen and convinced him that I was serious about him.

“Unfortunately, we’d not been as discreet as I’d thought, and eventually Auld Lagg came to hear of our tryst. He moved our family away to Kirkudbright, where he had a townhouse, and insisted that Finlay join the Duke of Argyll’s men to fight against the Jacobite pretender. It was nearly four years before I heard from Fin again. I was kept virtual prisoner, even after my father was released. He and my mother moved away to Laghall, near Troqueer, only about a day’s ride from Lag Castle, but my grandfather would not allow me to visit there. I used to ride out into the glen in the hope that one day I would see Fin. When my grandmother died, Auld Lagg moved to Farthingwell and I got a little more of my freedom back. I was twenty-three before I saw Fin again, but my feelings hadn’t changed in eight years.” Robert stopped talking and smiled warmly at the man sitting beside him.

“I was working as a gamekeeper. It was late September, and rutting season.” Finlay took up the story. “There’d been a few young bucks the year before, challenging the old stag who led the herd, and I worried that he’d lose his place that year. I was lying in the heather, watching the deer, when this fool comes galloping up the glen and sets the whole lot running. Well, I stood up and stormed over to where he’d pulled up his horse, to give him a piece of my mind, and the next thing I know, he’s off his horse and has pulled me into his arms.” Finlay shook his head in mock disgust. “Act first, think later. It’s always been his way. He’s no better now than he was then.” He stopped and smiled fondly at the man by his side.

“But what has this got to do with us?” Alex asked.

“I’m getting to that,” Robert said with a nod. “I was lucky. After eight years, Finlay hadn’t taken a wife and started a family as I feared. Instead, he was as pleased to see me as I was him. We met whenever we could, in secret, over the next few months, then the following April my grandfather passed on. My parents had no desire to move back to the castle, and I took up residence. We’ve lived here, together, ever since.”

“Together?” I asked, wanting to be certain that I understood what he was saying.

“Aye, together. As man and, well, not wife. I know the Church and the law is against it, but here, in the privacy of our home, in the isolation of the glen, we can be ourselves. *Mo leannan* Finlay was all I’ve ever wanted, and I am a lucky man in that he wants me as well.”

The look they gave each other was deeply personal, and I felt a hint of embarrassment just watching such an open display of affection. It wasn’t anything I’d ever seen between two men. I couldn’t even remember seeing such naked adoration on the faces of my own parents when they looked at each other, yet I knew that their match had been one of love rather than a beneficial arrangement to their families.

“Which brings us to you two.” Robert turned back to us. “What you feel for each other...” He held his hand up to silence us as we both automatically began to protest. “I am not saying that you feel about each other as we do, but you’ll not deny there is something?”

Alex and I looked at each other. His lip was caught in his teeth again and an uncertain frown creased his brow. I raised an eyebrow at him and he nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Aye,” I admitted quietly, while I still looked at him. “There maybe could be something between us.”

“The other thing is your situation. Finlay and I have been torn apart by a war that neither of us wanted a part in. We lost years we could have had together. I made a vow, after all that happened in the Fifteen, that I would never be involved in another man’s war. You are caught up now in a war neither of you have any interest in and on opposite sides. One will win, the other lose, which means whatever happens you will both lose. No one can say how long it will all last. It could be over by Easter, or it might go on for years. What I am offering you is safety, and time.”

In the silence that followed Robert’s offer, Finlay refilled our glasses. I took a large drink, the whisky burning my throat as I swallowed, before it warmed my stomach.

“If we took you up on your offer, how could we repay you? We’ve neither of us got much money, or the means to get any,” Alex asked.

“No money is needed. My family rarely visits the island. You’d be doing us a favour. To have you there to see the animals through the rest of the winter and to tend the land in the spring would be payment enough.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

“Maybe, but it’s not going to be easy. The land is rough, and the weather tends to be a bit on the wild side. I can’t say what state the croft will be in. It’s been a few years since I was last over,” Finlay advised.

“Maybe this year we’ll get across in the summer.” Robert smiled at Finlay with obvious affection as he spoke. “See how you boys are getting along. If you go that is.”

“Iain and I need to talk about this,” Alex replied. “Your offer is more than generous. We will retire now, if you’ll excuse us.”

“Of course, lad. The pair of you go on up. You rooms adjoin, so no one will know if you only use one of them.”

We stopped briefly in the room that I had been given, but didn’t stay. Instead we simply messed up the blankets to give the impression that someone had slept there. The bedding in Alex’s room had been changed and the fire built up again to ward against the winter chill that seemed to seep through the

exterior walls of the castle. The oil lamps had been lit on either side of the bed. As I shut the door behind us, Alex took my hand and led me to the bed, where he sat and then pulled me down to join him. He didn't let go; instead he intertwined his fingers with mine.

“So what do you think we should do?” he asked eventually.

“Should do? Or want to do?” There was a slightly bitter edge to my words.

“Either, both.”

“I should go back to Carlisle, to my regiment. I should report what happened, that I deserted, and take my punishment.” My words were bleak. I knew that my punishment would probably mean my death.

“And want?” Alex prompted. I simply shook my head. What I wanted, or what I was starting to think I wanted, wasn't something I could talk about. At least not yet. When I thought about telling Alex what I was thinking, I felt my throat go dry and my pulse quicken.

“What about you?” I managed to ask eventually.

“I think, I want to give us a chance,” he said gently. He reached over with his free hand and gently stroked my cheek. I found myself leaning into his touch before I pulled back.

“How can you want that? You barely know me. You are my prisoner, my enemy.”

“No, *mo ghrádh*, you are not my enemy, and I am not yours. I never have been. We are simply two people caught in a net of duty and obligation. We are trying to play a game with rules that neither of us hold with. I think it's time we did something for ourselves.”

With his words I felt an immediate sense of relief. His reassurance that he was not my enemy filled me with warmth.

“Let's get some rest,” he suggested. As he spoke, he began to tug the hem of his shirt free of his kilt. He pulled it off over his head and dropped it to the floor. As my hands went to my own shirt, he reached out towards me. “No,” he said gently. “You've taken care of me for the last week. Let me take care of you.”

He stood and quickly shed the rest of his clothing. There was nothing seductive in his actions, but I watched with mounting arousal as his body was revealed. My hand seemed to move involuntarily, drawn to touch him. He

clearly wasn't embarrassed as he stood stark naked before me, his own body betraying that I was not alone in my attraction. He reached out to me and pulled me up onto my feet. His arms circled my waist as he pulled me towards him and gave me a swift kiss before turning and sitting down. As he did, I caught him wincing slightly.

"Is your leg painful?"

"A little," he admitted. "There should be some tonic on the dressing table that Margaret mixed up for me. I should probably take some more before we sleep."

"Stay there." I crossed the room to where a jug of water and glass had been set, next to it a small vial of sweet-smelling, dark liquid.

"Just two drops in the glass of water."

I measured the medication out carefully and returned to the bed, where I held out the glass to Alex. He sniffed suspiciously and then drank the contents quickly, his mouth twisting into a grimace before he shuddered. "That's revolting," he advised handing it back to me.

I placed the glass on the table and returned to him. He'd pulled himself backwards and raised his right leg so it was resting on the mattress, the other leg he bent at the knee over the edge of the bed. His semi-erect cock rose from its nest of dark hair between his spread thighs. Reaching out, he pulled me closer to the bed, hooking his foot behind my ankles.

Without speaking, he carefully removed the belt that held my sporran and placed it on the floor. My shirt he slowly untucked and inched upward, his hands stroking over bare skin of my stomach and chest as they uncovered it. He brushed his thumbs over my nipples, and I watched as the dusky skin puckered. He was unable to reach any higher, so I pulled the shirt over my head and dropped it behind me. His hands continued to caress my chest, which unlike his was devoid of hair. He traced his fingers along the lines of muscles, reaching up towards my shoulders and sweeping gently down my arms. I heard his breath hitch and couldn't help watching as his shaft hardened. My own was beginning to stand to attention, pushing out the front of my kilt just below his mouth.

His hands moved to my waist, but he didn't unfasten the kilt as I expected. Instead, he gripped a little more tightly and bent forward, nuzzling at my dick through the fabric with his cheek. As he turned his cheek, he nipped lightly at the tip with his teeth, making me gasp. He looked up at me through his

eyelashes, an impish grin on his face. Letting go of my waist, he slid his hands down my hips. Reaching the hemline, he simply lifted it and leant forward, disappearing beneath the fabric.

“A *Dhía!*” I cursed as the tip of his tongue tracked its way along the underside of my cock and then swirled around the head.

For a second he pulled back slightly, before taking me into the warm, wet cavern of his mouth and sucking gently. I rocked backwards as his lips played around the flare of my cockhead and the flat of his tongue rubbed across the head of my cock. He dropped the edge of my kilt and placed his hands under it, brushing up the outside of my thighs before taking a firm grip on my hips. Looking down, I could see the taut muscles of his lower back as he bent forwards. I wanted to stretch forward and touch, but I couldn’t reach.

Instead I started to undo the buckle on my kilt, unwrapping it and letting it fall away, so I could watch. His mouth was stretched around me, his head bobbing up and down. He pulled back and released me: the cool air of the room made the sensitive wet skin almost seem to prickle. Sticking out his tongue, he gently lapped the slit at the tip where a large bead of fluid had gathered.

As his mouth opened again and he took me back inside, I grasped his shoulders—for balance if for no other reason. He laid the flat of his tongue against the underside of my shaft and sucked. The pressure against my cock sent waves of sensation along it, each time the pleasure building higher and higher. I moaned loudly as the tip of my prick hit the back of his throat. He swallowed, as though trying to pull me further in. Everything was suddenly so sensitive. My balls tightened and my thighs began to shake. I couldn’t help but try and jerk my hips in time with the suction. I suddenly felt strangely light-headed.

“Alex!” I tightened my grip as I spoke, trying to warn him that I was about to spill.

He didn’t stop. If anything he increased the speed and intensity of his suction. I tried to speak again, but the words that came out my mouth made no sense even to me. I seemed to have no control over my hips, as they erratically tried to keep up with Alex’s ministrations. I cried out suddenly as I released into his mouth. My knees began to tremble and I staggered. Only Alex’s grip on me kept me upright.

I stood there panting heavily, my chest was beaded with sweat and the hair at my brow and neck damp. My now softened cock felt like it was still

twitching with each beat of my heart. I wasn't sure what to say, or in fact if I should say anything. Did you thank someone for taking you in their mouth and pleasuring you that way?

"Come to bed?" Alex asked. He let go of me and slid across to the other side of the bed where he put out the lamp before lying back against the pillows. For a second I hesitated. But all it took was him opening his arms to have me crawling over the mattress towards him. He pulled a light blanket over us and I curled up in his hold. My head rested against his chest where I could feel the beat of his heart.

On the very edge of sleep, I whispered, "I was never your enemy either, and I want to give us a chance too."

If he answered I didn't hear him. The last thing I remembered as I drifted to sleep was the press of his lips against my forehead.

Epilogue

It was still raining. I don't think it had stopped since we'd first arrived on the island the day before.

We'd ridden out along the Glen of Lag three days earlier. The first night we'd made it to St John's Town of Dalry, where we'd found a coaching inn which offered rooms for rent. The next morning we'd entered the Galloway Forest; the thick dark pine trees weren't easy to travel through, but they kept off the worst of the weather. It was a further day's travel until we reached the port of Girvan where, thanks to Finlay's connections, we'd found a captain willing to hire out his boat and crew on a miserable winter day and make the crossing to Ailsa Craig.

The sea was rough, and embarrassingly neither Alex nor I had time to find our sea legs. The horses hadn't enjoyed the crossing either, frightened by the motion of the boat and the enclosed space below decks where they'd been placed. It wasn't a long journey, and soon the boat pulled into a small open harbour and dropped anchor. As soon as we'd paid the captain, he let down the cargo hatch in the shallow waters and we rode ashore, carrying with us generous gifts pressed upon us by Robert before we left Lag Castle.

We followed the directions we'd been given to a small, isolated cottage. The whitewashing that covered the stone walls was beginning to peel and crumble in places, and the thatched roof looked sorely in need of repair. I just

hoped it would see us through the winter. Inside, the ground floor was open, a large fireplace at each end. One served in a simple kitchen, where a rough wooden table with a couple of chairs took up most of the room. Beside the fireplace, a dresser held a few pieces of crockery and some pots and pans for cooking.

At the other end of the room, a large, plain-carved bench stood in front of the fire. There was a large rocking chair in one corner and beside it a spinning wheel that neither of us knew how to use. The only other furniture at that end of the room was a case clock which had long since stopped. The windows, set in each side of the cottage, were small but thankfully glazed. A narrow set of stairs led up to the first floor, where there was another room containing a low bed with a mattress stuffed with straw. The only other furniture up there was a couple of heavy iron-bound wooden chests, which contained blankets, towels, and some basic clothing.

Behind the cottage was a roughly marked out paddock, with a small open-sided shed, which gave enough shelter for the horses, and a small supply of grain and hay. Further away, on the common land, we could see three cows and around half a dozen sheep. Beside the barn was a deep well, which provided fresh water.

The first night, we'd stabled the horses and collapsed into bed, exhausted by our journey. Though he might deny it, Alex was still recovering from his injuries. Curled up together in the bed, we'd done no more than kiss each other while we listened to the wind rustle the thatching. Even the scratchy straw that poked through the mattress could not keep us awake.

We'd woken to a fine drizzle and mist, which clouded our view of the island. We'd found some dry wood stacked under what looked like an old sailcloth beside the cottage. Soon the fire we built at the kitchen end had been lit and a cauldron of porridge was hung over it to cook. I left Alex inside while I went and checked on Bran and Cèò, the elderly grey gelding that Finlay had insisted we take with us.

Later, we'd ridden to the castle at the other end of the island and given the laird the letter of introduction and a copy of the tenancy for the croft that Robert had drawn up. When we left, we were laden with food and goods for the cottage which they thought we'd find useful. We also had a promise that in the next few days someone would bring over not just some feed for the animals, but a few chickens as well.

We spent the evening in front of the fire, lying tangled together, on a couple of the thickest blankets we had to protect us from the cold stone floor. As we lay there we talked, about our past, our families, our future. I had wound up the old clock earlier in the day, after determining the time while we were at the castle. It probably wasn't totally accurate. Shortly before midnight and we were both yawning, but neither ready to damp down the fire and head upstairs.

"Stay there, I won't be long," Alex said, suddenly rising to his feet. I watched as he headed to the back door and pulled on his boots. As he left, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the low beamed ceiling above me. Lulled by the warmth of the fire and the lateness of the hour, I must have drifted off to sleep.

I jerked awake to the heavy knocking on the front door. Looking around, I was concerned to see that Alex hadn't returned. The knock on the door came again, slightly sharper this time. I rose to my feet and lit one of the candles by the hearth, before padding barefoot to the entrance.

I pulled open the door. "What are you doing?" I asked in bemusement as I found Alex standing on the doorstep.

He was wet through. His hair was plastered to his head, his shirt stuck to him, and the sodden wool of his kilt hung heavily at his knee. He smiled and lifted his hand, in which he held a small parcel wrapped in cloth.

"It's past midnight. Open it."

"Come inside," I urged stepping back out of the doorway. "Are you trying to bring yourself down with another fever?"

"Open it first." He shook the bag gently, and I heard a faint clinking sound.

I took it from him and undid the leather thong it was tied with. Lying it on the palm of one hand, I carefully opened it. Inside were two smaller twists of cloth, one containing salt, and the other oats. There were also a couple of small silver coins and a few slivers of the dry wood which we used to start the fire.

"Oh!" I gasped, looking from the gifts up at his smiling face.

"It is Hogmanay, and all is well. I bring blessings on this house and its occupants for the forthcoming year." The words were said almost ritualistically. As he finished speaking, he reached into the sporran which was hanging at the front of his kilt and took out a small flask. "You'll drink to the new year with me?"

“Of course, and they do say, it’s the best of luck when at your doorstep on Hogmanay you find a tall, dark-haired man on the other side.”

He followed me into the kitchen, where I lay down the gifts on the table and took two glasses from the dresser. He poured a small measure of whisky into each before handing one back to me.

“What shall we drink to? For better times?”

“To a new start, to us?” I suggested.

We raised our glasses and clinked them together.

“*Slainte!*”

The End

Historical Note

The Clifton Moor Skirmish, where Alex and Iain met, took place on 19th December 1745 and is credited with being the last battle fought on British Soil. I have taken a few liberties with the timeline: the Second Siege of Carlisle actually started a few days after I have set it and the Duke of Cumberland's men would not have been in the city at the time. While Alex and Iain are fictional characters, Robert Grierson was the Third Baronet of Lag, and his family were involved (and imprisoned) in the 1715 uprising as described. The First Baronet, 'Auld Lagg', his grandfather, was also a real and much feared man, responsible for the persecution and death of many Scottish Catholics. Homer, Robert's illegitimate uncle is also a real person, and was a surgeon apothecary married to a Margaret Littlejohn. Robert died without issue in 1764, and the title passed to his younger brother, Gilbert. There is no record that he ever married, but both Finlay and their relationship are totally fictional.

The Jacobite Uprising came to an end at the Battle of Culloden on 16th April 1746, but I'd like to think that Iain and Alex would have stayed in their cottage on Ailsa Craig for quite a while after that.

Glossary

A Dhía! – Oh God!

Bairns – children

Banyan – a type of dressing gown, originating in India

Buidheachas do Dhía – Thank God

Burraidh – idiot

Caoch! – crap

Cianalas – homesick

Crowdie – a type of soft cheese

Dram – drink

Eireachdail – handsome

Gogan – penis

Kebbie – Scottish walking stick

Madainn mhath – Good morning

Mo charaid – my friend

Mo ghrádh – my love

Mo leannan – my beloved

Mo murinìn – my darling

Oat bannocks – oat cakes

Tha mi duilich – I'm sorry

Reubaltach Cridhe – Rebellious Hearts

Author Bio

K works by day in the legal profession. She has to in order to keep the critters who let her live in their home to the manner to which they have become accustomed. When they allow her any spare time, she reads (anything that is put in front of her), knits (mainly socks), bakes (usually cupcakes), and occasionally takes dictation from the strange people that turn up in her head. She hopes one day to be allowed a large shotgun and a decent recipe for rabbit stew to deal with the damn plot bunny!

Contact & Media Info

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