



ONE
KNIGHT'S
STAND

TANYA ANNE
CROSBY

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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SHERRILYN KENYON #1 NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Chapter 1

December 31, 1746

Lady Elizabeth Louise Wolfe fidgeted in her seat, feeling the tension mount in her shoulders as the carriage wended its way closer to their intended destination: Chreagach Mhor, a no-man's-land eight months after Culloden.

The old laird had been executed, the elder son as well—traitors to England, so she'd been told. Now, if only to further someone's notion of justice, she was consigned to wed the younger son, who was only too callow to reveal himself a traitor... as yet.

What was he? Fourteen? Fifteen?

Young and malleable, Lachlan MacKinnon was to be "softened" by Elizabeth and then mentored by her Uncle. If she succeeded, England would have itself a new northern "friend."

If she failed...

She would be married to an undesirable at best.

A traitor, at worst.

But that alone wasn't what bothered her most. Rather, she appreciated men and women who followed the dictates of their hearts and stood up for causes they believed in—like her. Or at least she liked to believe they were like her. And really, it took courage even to distribute pamphlets to rouse interest for the defense of runaway slaves—as her mother had done.

In fact, perhaps she would be well in Scotland, though she knew her uncle was sending her away, in part, to remove her from the influence of "that motley crew of ne'er do wells."

Still, it didn't help her mood all that much to know that she must do this alone, with only her chaperone for company. Wasn't a wedding supposed to be the grandest thing ever?

It was the worst.

Her father couldn't be roused from his travels to join her, her uncle and aunt were too busy celebrating the Twelve Nights, and not even her cousin James could be swayed from his noble duties—what had he said? He had some debt of honor to pay?

To whom.

And why couldn't his debt be left for another occasion?

Why must he, too, leave Elizabeth to face this alone?

Worst of all, how was she supposed to face that poor child?

She was twenty-three, and he just a boy. How was she supposed to denude herself, and perform wifely duties, when he was a child, with more hands than sense?

And, dear God, how in the name of England was she supposed to help mend a rift between their nations? Wasn't that putting too much on the shoulders of women conscripted for this effort? Mind you, that's precisely what this was, yet another form of compulsory service. It would be one thing if she had adopted this cause all on her own. It was another thing to force a woman—any woman—to lie back and do her duty for the sake of England... in bed.

And nevertheless, it wasn't so much that she didn't wish to... explore. It was merely that she wished it to be her own choice—not that of her uncle's or cousin's.

Upsetting herself more and more with dark thoughts, she considered that she was being used for a crusade not her own. While, in truth, she didn't have any meaningful opinions about The King Over the Water, neither did she feel invested in the Forty-Five Rebellion—not for its cause, nor its resolution. These were men's wars, and in Elizabeth's estimation, women would never agree to put their sons on a battlefield with swords at each other's throats. It was no more than a dangerous game of King of the Hill—one minute this king, the next another. What they really needed was a woman on that throne—one with sensibilities something like her own.

Tapping her fingers impatiently, she flicked a glance at Mrs. Grace—the only person in her life who had ever truly understood her, except for maybe her cousin, James, although he, in fact, was the very author of a misery.

"It will be good for you to get away," he'd said.

"You'll be lady of a great house," he'd said.

"Think of it this way," he'd said.

"Your affiliation may well save a good family from ruin."

Bollocks.

That family was already ruined. They'd lost both a father and a brother and for all intents and purposes, their lands as well. And in the meantime, it stood to be seen as to whether Elizabeth would even have a complete roof over her head. Many of the Scots' homes had been razed, if not seized. And what was she supposed to do if she arrived to find the place in shambles? What would her mother have said, if only she'd lived to see this day?

Plenty, Elizabeth was certain.

Like Elizabeth, her mother had been painfully outspoken.

Unfortunately, her father didn't appreciate Elizabeth's forthright nature. The very instant her mother kicked up her toes, he'd foisted her upon an aunt and uncle who scarcely had time for their own progeny, much less an annoying niece who was a champion for the poor and oppressed. Neither did they understand her. Only her cousin James had ever cared much for her welfare; although now, so it seemed, even he was against her.

What was he thinking?

Did he expect she wouldn't speak up if she found the situation untenable? After all

these years, did he believe she would turn a blind eye to the atrocities her compatriots were inflicting? Indeed, she was not to be trusted to hold her tongue, and what then?

She, too, would be branded a traitor...

Did they execute women?

At the best of times, Elizabeth was not the one they should assign to such a delicate mission. No matter what her country of origin, she tended to call things the way she saw them. So then, what now if she should happen to agree with her husband's family?

Lord only knew, not even her uncle could save her then.

She sighed portentously, annoyed all over again, and hardly in the mood to arrive in the dead of night at some wreckage in the wilds of Scotland.

"It won't be long now," said Mrs. Grace, with a forbearing smile.

Elizabeth smiled back at her chaperone, wondering if she knew how close Elizabeth was to shouting for the driver to halt... so she could run away, screaming.

But there was this small bit of curiosity that kept her seated: Why did her uncle feel such responsible for this particular clan, when, to the best of Elizabeth's knowledge, they were perfect strangers? Simply because James was the one ordered to execute the elders didn't make her Uncle Edward responsible for their reintegration. No doubt, it was a nice gesture, but her mother's brother simply didn't have the same sense of charity as his deceased sister, and, in fact, he really liked to make the point that it was her mother's audacious personality that put her in the "wrong place at the right time" —in front of a speeding carriage, with a sign in her hand.

"How much longer?" Elizabeth relented, ending her long bout of dissenting silence.

The elder woman peered out of the carriage. It was snowing harder, and the carriage was slowing down. At this pace, they would arrive at Dunmore on the Twelfth Night, not the First.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Grace, as the voices outside grew louder and louder.

Finally, the carriage came to a complete halt, and they heard their driver scuttle down, muttering a curse—shocking words no lady ought to overhear, but Elizabeth snickered and Mrs. Grace shook her head. After a long moment, the driver—one Mr. Hadley, who by the by, appeared to be smuggling spirits, judging by the suspicious sounds coming from their luggage rack—appeared at their door, pulling it open and giving Elizabeth only the briefest of glances before addressing her companion. "The bridge north of Calvine lies buried," he said, brows pinched. "Won't be passing through t'night, mayhap not even tomorrow."

"Oh, good grief," said Mrs. Grace. "What would you have us do, Mr. Hadley?"

"Welp," said the driver. "There's an Inn here in Calvine."

"Insufferable," complained Elizabeth, though not because the thought of stopping aggrieved her, but really, she didn't appreciate that Mr. Hadley's question wasn't addressed to her, considering that it was her interest being discussed. She was not a child—unlike her betrothed.

For her outburst, the driver cast her a disgruntled glance and Mrs. Grace reached out to pat Elizabeth's hand, as though to say, "Quiet, dear."

"Can you please take us there?" Mrs. Grace inquired.

"Sorry mum," said the driver. "You'll see when you get down. The road's full of travelers, all stuck on account of the weather. I'm guessing most'll be waking the new year in their coaches."

"Stuck?" said Elizabeth. "What do you mean stuck?"

"Stuck," repeated the man, with a sniff, then, again, he turned his face to her and spoke to Mrs. Grace, as though he couldn't bear the thought of addressing her.

"Really!" she exclaimed. Although she knew him not at all, she wondered if he might be lying, or... scheming. He had some look about him she simply didn't trust.

"Ask for Balthazar," said Hadley. "He ain't got much room, but I'll warrant if there's a bed to be let, he'll give it to ye if you tell him I sent ye."

"Oh, thank you," said Mrs. Grace, kindly, and the man departed.

"I don't like that he assumes to ignore me," complained Elizabeth, her brow furrowed.

"My dear, don't be so ready to take offense." Mrs. Grace patted her arm yet again. "You're quite direct, at times, and tis off-putting to some. Alas, not to worry," She said. "I will see to it that we are settled. And, of course, Elizabeth knew that to be true. Mrs. Grace might not be overly fierce, but she was infinitely patient and persevering—two traits Elizabeth sadly did not share. Twenty minutes later, they were both standing with valises before a grizzled, snaggle-toothed old man who was far too preoccupied with combing his beard to note the two of them standing before his counter. But, of course, Mrs. Grace was hardly inclined to disturb him, so they waited "patiently," while he gently worked at a Lilliputian tangle, and Elizabeth stood melting—quite literally. She had snow in her shoes, snow in her hood, and even more snow in her hair, all of it thawing and making her damp. She could feel those wild little curls losing their shape and tickling her nape. Nevertheless, she held her tongue, inspecting the interior of the inn.

The pale stone walls above the waist-high wainscoting were pitted with age. In observation of the holiday, there was a Christmas Crown hanging from a high ceiling—a wreath of sorts, woven with small branches of ash to ward away bad spirits. Additionally, there were boughs of holly strewn across the hearth and over every doorway, tied in place by striking red ribbons.

But the fire in the hearth was the most curious thing of all. It changed colors, from green to gold to violet—a striking display that the boffin in her longed to explore. Naturally, it had the effect of drawing every drunkard's eye in the tavern, sedating them as would a hefty dose of laudanum—very clever, she thought. The mistress of this inn was brilliant—unlike this oaf standing behind the counter. Alas, the longer they stood, the more attention they garnered.

Most disconcertingly, there were a number of male occupants in the crowded tavern, some eyeing Elizabeth with undisguised disapproval—perhaps because they were Scots?

A few eyed her with arched brows and veiled smiles. Regardless of how they felt about it, no doubt two proper English women traveling alone on a holiday was no common sight.

Beneath her feet lay a carpet of sticky straw, a rather primitive application that was no doubt cheaper than carpet, considering the way the guests sloshed ale up over their heaping cups—all the while they drunkenly repeated the same two verses of the Boar's

Head Carol.

The boar's head in hand bring I,
Bedecked with bays and rosemary.
I pray you, my masters, be merry...

The boar's head, as I understand,
Is the rarest dish in all this land,
Which thus bedecked with a gay garland.

"Pardon, madam," said Mrs. Grace as a sweet-looking woman passed them by with a tray full of foamy ale. "Can you please direct us to one Mr. Balthazar."

"John!" screamed the woman, surprising them both with the tenor of her voice. The tray in her hand threatened to overturn its burden as she cast a glance at the man behind the counter who, inconceivably, was still combing his beard.

"No, we are looking for Balthazar," said Elizabeth. "We were told—"

"John Joseph Pitagowan!" screamed the woman again, and Elizabeth gave Mrs. Grace an alarmed glance, to which her chaperone responded with an admonishing nod, as though to say, "I told you so. Please leave it to me!"

"What?" said the man, to which the woman slid her chin forward—like a hen—and said, "Can't ye see we've guests tae tend? Leave off with the whiskers already, else ye'll find yourself on the morrow wi' your chin bald as your head!"

The man flushed brightly. "We're full to the rafters," he explained.

"Oh, but, sir, our driver," interjected Mrs. Grace very sweetly. "He said to tell one Mr. Balthazar that Mr. Hadley sent us."

"Hadley?" said the goat-chinned man, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Why didn't ye say so! Did he say if he brought—"

"I really don't know," said Mrs. Grace. "But I do suspect the answer to your question might be yes, because he does, indeed, have a package for someone ensconced with our luggage." And this they knew, because Mr. Hadley had steadfastly refused to carry a second trunk for Elizabeth. And therefore, she'd been forced to pack away her entire life in one small suitcase and a tiny valise. Her uncle had promised to send the rest.

Exasperated, the tavern woman threw up a hand and hurried away, perhaps nettled by the name Mrs. Grace provided, or else she was certain now that they would be well cared for. Clearly, Mr. Balthazar or Mr. Pitagowan—whatever his name might be—was infinitely pleased to hear from their driver. "Good ole Hadley," he said, tugging at his beard. And then he gave a nod toward the woman who'd disappeared. "That's me wife," he explained. "She's no' much for good ole Hadley, but he's a good chap." And then he launched immediately into what sounded as though it might still prove to be a dismissal. "Thing is, we've only got one bed left." He eyed both of them circumspectly. "Belongs to my daughter, though, as it happens, she's away for the evening, so I believe I can let it. She likes to get away now and again. But," he said, inclining his head. "There's still only one bed."

"Oh, dear," said Mrs. Grace. "Have you nothing else at all?"

He shrugged. "A cot and a blanket in the stable," he said. "But, don't worry, it's all perfectly partitioned."

Mrs. Grace waved a hand at him. "That' good enough for me," she said. "You may assign Lady Elizabeth your daughter's room, and I thank you kindly."

"Oh, no!" said Elizabeth, but Mrs. Grace held up a hand in that way she had when matters were already settled. "I'll be fine," she said. "You take the room, dear."

"But—"

"No buts," said Mrs. Grace. "I'll be perfectly fine. And anyway, I can hardly tolerate my own snoring. If we share, you'll be baggy eyed and fit for no one's company, much less prepared to meet your darling groom."

"I would be happier to share," argued Elizabeth.

"No," said Mrs. Grace. "I won't allow it. How much?" she inquired of the innkeeper.

"Half a crown for the both o' ye. Supper'll be extra."

"Very well," said Mrs. Grace, and with that, she removed the proper remuneration from her reticule and asked, "Shall I pay you directly?"

"Oh, no," said the man. "Gi' all remittance to Mrs. Pitagowan, else she'll put my arse in the snow with Hadley." His blush returned, as he pointed toward the woman who'd already yelled at him once. "Bess," he said. "She's o'er there."

Mrs. Grace pointed as well, and he nodded, then her faithful companion grasped Elizabeth by the arm and squeezed gently, and said, "Sleep well, dear." And suddenly she was away, leaving Elizabeth to deal with the innkeeper.

"So ye're going tae meet yer groom?" he said, once again tugging at his beard.

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Inverness?"

"Yes, sir." The man was entirely too forward; still Elizabeth held her tongue, looking wistfully over her shoulder at Mrs. Grace, who was now conversing quite amenably with "Bess" "o'er there." It never failed to impress her that Mrs. Grace could so easily get along with anyone—unlike Elizabeth, who hadn't a good conversational bone in her body. But it really mustn't be entirely unexpected, when she'd been left to fend for herself for most of her life.

And anyway it was never on her own behalf that she became nettled; nothing ever got her dander up more than the disaffection of others.

Elizabeth waited whilst the man searched the myriad of keys on his belt, and then he smiled congenially and led the way into a scullery, where he hollered to a young boy to light the fire in Carrie's room, and to change the bed sheets. Afterward, he led Elizabeth into another smaller room, then stopped before an old, iron-banded door.

"So, then, who's the lucky groom?" he asked as he slid a big black key into the lock. "Is it Douglass?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"Mackintosh?"

"No sir. I'll be pledging my..."

"Ach, now, dinna tell me, it must be MacKinnon!" He shook his head sadly, and said,

"Poor bastard." He jiggled the knob, then opened the door to let her in.

The room itself was quite cozy, with a small brick fireplace and an adjoining door at the far side of the room. "Is that perhaps another guest room?" she asked, hopefully.

"Nay," he said, shaking his head. "Tis my daughter's closet."

"May I use it to store my valise?" She lifted the heavy bag in her hand, only belatedly realizing that he had never once bothered to offer to carry it—not that this itself should bother her overmuch. Elizabeth had long been of the mind that a woman could carry her own bag. It was rather his unhelpful demeanor.

"Nay," he said again. "Tis locked. We've had some guests snooping of late, and my daughter's no' too keen on it. Also," he said with a lift of his brow. "No baths. Ain't no one about to draw you any water. And if you want tae sup, ye'll be more'n welcome in the hall. Mrs. Pitagowan makes a fine stew, and I believe she's got some frumenty as well."

"Frumenty?"

"Pudding," he said, "wheat boiled in milk, with cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger, made special for the holiday, all very expensive!"

"Thank you," said Elizabeth, and then he was gone.

Still, she wasn't alone. She waited patiently for the young man who'd rushed in after them to finish lighting the hearth fire, and then change the bedsheets. After he left as well, Elizabeth closed the door. As weary as she was, she set down her valise in the middle of the room and went to test the bed, considering how hungry she might be—perhaps not enough to brave the randy lot in the tavern. And anyway, she doubted she would see Mrs. Grace again this evening. Her companion was not the sort to dally before bedtime; no doubt she was already making herself comfortable out in the stables—or as comfortable as she was able.

Suddenly, she leapt up from the bed, curious to explore Carrie's closet. She jiggled the knob, and, found, much to her delight, and contrary to Mr. Pitagowan's claims, the door was unlocked. Only one look inside and she gasped over the grizzly display—it was a shrine full of wartime accoutrements: shields, swords, coats, cuffs, spurs, pistols, hats—much of which she suspected was still encrusted with blood. Certainly, the scent of the room was ghastly. And although it wasn't a small room by most standards, there was little doubt Mrs. Grace would prefer the stables. With a hand to her breast, she closed the door again and, resolved to make it a night—vittles could wait until the morrow, when everyone else was sleeping off hangovers.

Chapter 2

Callum MacKinnon was close enough to home now that he could taste the tang of pine in the air. Unfortunately, the carriageway was impassible—vehicles stalled along the roadway, some parked on the embankments, fresh snow piled high against their rutted wheels.

He frowned at the sight, considering that he might be able to slide through the blockade by abandoning the roadway, but, even eight months later, the area was still crawling with Sassenachs soldiers.

Bloody hell.

At this point, neither he nor his horse were particularly enjoying the bite of the wind, and the snow had already dampened his cloak. The last thing he wished to do was to arrive home looking like the walking dead, and scare his sister into pissing her bed.

And anyway, he was still far enough that, even if he managed to get through the crush, his aching bones might not make it through the night. His wounds were still raw—those on his body, and the one in his heart. Not only was his clan forever divided—some had fought for the Stuart King—he was returning home a traitor, pardoned only so long as he forfeited title and lands.

Decision made, he grunted his annoyance, although, in truth, he couldn't blame it on the weather. He was perpetually disgruntled these days, mourning that bright-hearted self he'd lost on a blood-soaked field at Culloden.

Ach, now, why shouldn't he be sour as sorrel?

He had an Englishman to thank for saving his miserable life, and considering that it was that same bloody Englishman who'd put a ball between his father's eyes, none of it sat well in his gut.

Bloody rotten bastards.

Even despite the fact that they'd already surrendered, General Hawley had ordered both Callum and his father executed, then, to make sure it was done, he stood by as one Major James Wolfe had fired the first ball. That his man wasn't too thrilled to end a life of a prisoner off the battlefield wasn't much of a comfort to Callum's father. Young as he was, the major was an excellent marksman, although once Hawley departed, Wolfe put the next two volleys into Callum—one through his shoulder, the other his thigh—then ordered Callum to run. And run, he had, by God. Only now he sometimes wished he too had taken a ball to the head rather than be forced to relive the memory of his father's twitching corpse and piddled plaid.

Even now, the heinous memory brought an unmanly sting to Callum's tired blue eyes, and he vowed to carry the ignoble image to his grave. So far as his brothers were all concerned, all they ever needed to know was that Angus MacKinnon died like a man—unlike his eldest son, who'd scurried away from the specter of death like a rat from a torch.

As for Wolfe... the sorry bastard...

If he'd meant for Callum to survive, a shoulder wound would have sufficed. How he'd made it so far as he had without succumbing to fever, Callum might never know. The memory of his final days on the run only resurfaced with a blur. Ever since, he'd spent months convalescing, two of those he couldn't even recall.

In the meantime, he had three young brothers and a wee sister waiting at home and, considering that he had very likely been pronounced a traitor to the Crown, he hadn't dared to apprise anyone he was still alive. Unfortunately, it was long past time to do so.

Consequently, and once again because of Major Wolfe, he was here on the Yuletide, stopping short of his destination, dawdling like a coward on the eve of a new year.

God's teeth, it was enough to sour any man's mood, and not even the promise of Mrs. Pitagowan's cranachan managed to lift his spirits.

With some effort, he slid down from his horse—a borrowed mare he'd have to return as soon as he was able. Wincing over the pain in his leg, ignoring the one in his heart, he handed the reins to a young lad, scarcely older than his brother Lachlan. He recognized the youth as one of Pitagowan's nephews, a bright haired lad with more freckles than the night had stars.

"Good tae see ye, lai—sir," said the youth, dressed as a proper Sassenach. And yet, despite that they'd gone and outlawed the clans, and forbade them to carry weapons, no one could mistake the boy's brogue. He was Scots through and through, and Callum knew his father well. The poor soul had fought beside him at Culloden, and died, so he'd been told. His cousin Carrie had since taken to scouring the battlefields for proof of life... or death.

"Uncle John'll be pleased tae see ye," said the lad brightly.

Callum gave the boy a nod, then fished out a full crown, handing it to him. It was New Year's Eve after all, the beginning of Hogmanay, and he trusted John to serve him on credit till he could chance to repay him. In the meantime, Little Joe and his brother needed all the help they could get.

Inside the inn, Pitagowan's wife had decorated the place in good Scot's style—festooning the hearth and trim with boughs of holly. She'd also lit a Yule log for the holiday—a hefty block of birch sprinkled with saltpeter to give it that violet hue. The smoke it emitted tickled the back of Callum's throat, and he'd warrant those men drinking and singing in the puffed up tavern would wake on the morrow with double the ache in their heads.

Better them, than me, he thought.

All he wanted for the instant was a good night's rest, and nevertheless, he feared, not even that was bound to soothe his soul.

He found John Pitagowan behind his bar, doing what he liked doing best—combing his

thick, white beard. Callum smiled over the all-too familiar sight and shook his head, a barb rising to his tongue. "Too bad you've no hair remaining on your head," he said, with a grin, and Pitagowan's comb halted midair. His, thick wiry brows collided, and then he slapped a hand to his burly breast.

"Is it you?"

Callum nodded, and the old man grinned.

Pitagowan had been a good friend of his Da's. During the most difficult of times, it was his father who'd given John Pitagowan the coin to go south and settle in Calvine.

John pulled the hat from his head, scrunching it, then brought a finger to his crusty old lips. "Call me Balthazar," he said. "Folks here don't know me as Pitagowan."

"Yes, they do!" said Bess, coming up behind Callum. "Dinna fool yourself into thinking they don't, husband." And then she craned her neck back to peer up at Callum. "Ain't ye a sight for sore eyes, Callum MacKinnon! We thought ye'd gone and swallowed a bullet!"

"Not me," Callum said, frowning.

The twinkle immediately extinguished from Bess Pitagowan's eyes and she said a little more dourly, "Alas, we heard." Her hand reached out to squeeze Callum's forearm. "We were right sorry to hear it, don't y' know. My Carrie keeps going up to see what she can find. My brother himself didn't show up on the rosters, and neither did he come home." She shook her head sadly. But, then, just as suddenly as it had vanished, her smile returned. "My sweet girl will be so sorry she missed you."

Callum raised a brow. Carrie was a lot of things, though she wasn't particularly sweet, nor was she little anymore. She was a wee bit loud, a wee bit crude, and a wee bit of a tease. One of these days it was going to get her in a lot of trouble. Callum had found himself, on more than one occasion, fending off the flame-haired vixen with the saucer eyes and freckled nose—a trait all the Pitagowans shared.

"Alas, I'll be gone come morn," Callum said. "I was only hoping ye'd have a room to let for the night?"

"Oh, dear, no," lamented Bess, "We've just rented the last—"

Pitagowan's eyes suddenly lit up. "Ho!" he said. "As it so happens to your very lovely bride!"

"Bride?" said Callum, taken aback.

"Aye! She's already here!" announced Pitagowan. "Snapped up the very last room! Come," he demanded, seizing Callum by the arm, and ushering him quickly through the scullery, as Bess wandered back to her guests.

Callum hadn't a moment to set the man straight.

"She's a bit like Carrie," he said. "Though I'm guessing you already know. Here we thought you'd been laid six-foot under, and all the while you were out hunting for a wife. It all makes sense," he said. "Being she's a Sassenach. You cunning devil!" he said. "Just like yer Da. In fact, I wouldn't be too surprised if Angus showed up here tonight as well."

Callum felt the proclamation like a punch to his gut. There was no way his father was still alive. He was dead as the iron nails in Carrie's bedroom door—dead as his heart had been for going on six months, until it was replaced by this bone-deep fury he couldn't shake.

To his utter dismay, he could scarcely keep up with a sixty year old man, but Pitagowan didn't notice, or was too polite to say so. He pulled Callum before Carrie's door, shoved in a ready key, then pushed Callum inside, barking with laughter.

"I'll send in a hot bath," he said, winking. "Looks like you need it. Oh! And something to eat." He laughed again, as he gave the other occupant of the room a raised thumb and then pointed to Callum and turned about with another chortle. "Love me a good miracle," he said, and then happily closed the door with an exuberant, "Ta ta!"

Chapter 3

"T a ta?"

The sight that greeted Callum as he entered Carrie's room—certainly not Carrie—effectively silenced any protest he might have uttered. A lovely, tawny-haired beauty sat wide-eyed on the bed, in little more than a delicate chemise.

The firelight caught the hint of red in her tresses, giving her pale, golden hair a soft, burnished hue. Her clearly defined cheeks bloomed with color, and he couldn't help himself; fascinated, he watched the blush spread down her long, delicate neckline, into her décolletage.

All his physical pain was forgotten, if only for the instant, and he was slow to remember his tongue as John closed the door behind him.

"I beg pardon," the woman said, rising from the bed. "There must be some mistake. This is my room!" And then she suddenly cocked her head, her golden brows colliding, as she asked, "Did I hear him say he would draw you a bath?"

Callum nodded, bemused.

"Insufferable! He told me there was no one available to draw one for me! And what's more, he insisted I eat out in that tavern with that randy lot of men; therefore, I was quite prepared to go to bed without supping."

She was English, by her accent, of that there was no doubt.

Wellborn, too, he decided.

And spoiled.

Callum blinked as she crossed her arms, her silken chemise entirely too revealing as she stood before the hearth fire. In her pique, she mustn't even realize, and God knew, it had been far too long since Callum had even seen a woman of her ilk, much less stood before one half-dressed. Swallowing convulsively, he lifted a hand to cover his eyes, as though to shield himself from the bright light of the sun—and that she was, bright as a sweltering noon-day sun, burning him up with her too-close proximity. No matter that she was the one blushing, Callum felt the heat of embarrassment creep over him as well—so bloody hot that, for a moment, he feared the return of his fever. "I-I'm sorry," he said, and he meant to turn and go, but she thrust a hand against the curve of her hip and glowered fiercely, shocking him with her pronouncement—not to mention, that bold way she puffed up her chest, revealing the soft moons of her bosom rising above her neckline.

"I am to wed Lord MacKinnon," she apprised him. "Do not doubt he'll have word of this from me, and both you and that tonsured innkeeper will have the devil to pay!"

Callum blinked thrice, trying to make sense of her words.

She was to marry who?

Not his father for certain, not him, and certainly it couldn't be young Lachlan, who'd only last year sprouted hairs on his bollocks.

"Mind you, I gave that man half a crown for this room," she was saying, "and if anyone should be sharing this room with me, it should be my chaperone, not you!"

Again, he blinked. "You're tae wed the MacKinnon?" he asked dubiously.

"Lord MacKinnon," she corrected him. "Need I remind—"

"Nay, my lady. You need remind me of anything," Callum said furiously, and, with the spell suddenly broken, he limped into the room, moving past the other occupant, and straight toward his bed. "I assure you I am reminded daily of what we Scots have lost. I don't need any bleedin' Sassenach to advise me."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, sounding alarmed, instead of angry. "Are you hurt?"

He was acutely aware that she moved behind him, her hand hovering behind his elbow as though he were some feeble old man in need of help. "I am fine," he snapped. "Dinna fash yourself, my lady!"

"Oh, but you are not!" she insisted.

"Yes, I am," Callum argued, although he wasn't. Every bone in his body ached, and none more than his heart. The physician had said he was fortunate. Part of his femur had shattered with the impact of the ball, and, unfortunately, the doctor hadn't arrived in time to remove it so the wound wouldn't fester. By the time the bullet was extracted, he was left with a raging fever that persisted for weeks. However, he didn't remember any of that.

Evidently, the wound in his shoulder had fared only a little better. At least it hadn't gotten infected. Still, he reached for his shoulder as he sat upon the bed, grimacing, one hand on his leg, the other crossing his chest to clutch at his aching flesh.

Like some lady of the lamp, the woman advanced upon him, offering her hands to steady him as he sat, and some angry, raging part of Callum wanted nothing more than to seize her, drag her into his embrace and kiss her punitively—half out of some primal need to ease his ravaged soul, half out of a fierce desire to punish someone for the crimes of her countrymen.

And nevertheless... none of it was her fault.

He realized that as much as he did the simple fact that she was trying to help. And nevertheless, he said again, through gritted teeth, "I am fine."

She stepped back to assess him, looking perfectly stricken although she knew him not at all. Nor did she know what injuries he'd sustained beneath his shirt and trews.

He looked up at her then, grateful that they'd switched places, because, at least now, he could no longer see her fine form limned by the light of the fire.

She was beautiful, certainly, although as fierce as she had been standing up to him, raging against Balthazar, her eyes were now filled with kindness and compassion, and it was nearly his undoing. God's truth, any man would be fortunate simply to know her, much less wed her—a woman unfettered by her emotions, and brave enough to stand up to a stranger, yet tender-hearted enough to consider his wellbeing.

Suddenly, Callum was bone tired, ready to be home in his own bed, wishing he could forget the hell he'd encountered at Culloden and the pain of his injuries since.

For a long, long moment, he didn't know what else to say... so he said nothing...

The man was clearly in pain.

There was nothing about his demeanor that decried this fact, and Elizabeth was utterly torn, both incensed that the innkeeper had let her room to some man not of her acquaintance, and now entirely horrified to find him at sixes and sevens.

"Please... won't you allow me to help?" she asked, and before he could think to refuse her, she seized up the shawl she'd lain over her valise and rushed out the door, straight through the adjoining chamber, and into the scullery, fully intending to find the man a proper doctor.

"Pardon!" she said loudly.

A number of eyes flicked in her direction, although, considering the holiday crush, the majority returned to their given tasks, except for the young man who'd lit her hearth fire.

"My lady?" he said.

"Is there a doctor about?"

"No, my lady."

"A midwife?"

"No my lady."

"Well!" Elizabeth donned her most haughty demeanor, taking a cue from her aunt Celeste. No one ever dared gainsay Aunt Celeste, and come to think of it, if her Uncle didn't appreciate strong women, he certainly surrounded himself with more than enough of them. "I would like to speak to the proprietor, at once!"

The young man scratched his head. "You mean, Balthazar?"

"Mr. Pitagowan. Balthazar—whatever his name is!"

"E's—" The lad pointed, and never got the chance to finish his statement, because Elizabeth didn't wait. She turned her back to the kitchen and marched into the adjoining room, where the innkeeper stood, once again, combing his infernal beard.

"Good sir," she said. "There's a man in my room who requires your immediate attention!"

The innkeeper looked confused, and said, "MacKinnon?"

"Yes, as I've said. I am Lord MacKinnon's betrothed, and I really must insist you bring in a physician at once. And, please, please, don't worry, I will accept the charges."

The innkeeper pocketed his comb, but he furrowed his brow, and just at that instant, one of the tavern guests raked back a chair and approached the bar.

"Well, well," said the guest "What's this?" He turned to his acquaintances at the table behind him and said, "Loud as a cannon, but pretty as ye please. I'll help ye, sweet dove. You need a doctor, you say?"

A voice boomed at her back.

"Mind your own affairs, Douglass. Put your fat nose back in your cup, else I'll gi' ye a reason to drink!"

The man visibly shrank from the man at her back. "Callum!" he exclaimed. "We all

thought ye were dead.”

“I nearly was, but believe me, I’m hale enough to keep my word. Didn’t ye hear the lady say she was MacKinnnon’s bride?”

The Scotsman—Douglass—lifted a hand in surrender and Elizabeth turned to assess the man at her back. If he was still in pain, there was nothing about his demeanor now that betrayed the fact. He did, indeed, look hale as anyone she had ever met.

In fact, the sight of him stole her breath...

And nevertheless, she didn’t need his defense. She could fend for herself. There were British guards posted out in the yard. This was no longer a lawless country. She would have told Mister Douglass so, but this man—Callum—didn’t give her the chance. The scowl on his face darkened as he advanced on her and slid his arm about her waist, drawing her close. She gasped with shock, as he bent to whisper in her ear.

Chapter 4

"Ye look like a doxy," he said for her ears alone, and with another gasp of outrage, she tried to extricate herself from his arms, but Callum wouldn't oblige her.

"How dare you!" she said, and then, perhaps remembering her state of undress, she went limp in his arms. Clearly, she'd been so concerned over his wellbeing that she'd forgotten what she was wearing. No doubt her dress covered all her fine bits, and her shawl hid the most tempting features. Thankfully, without the firelight to illumine her, she was nearly concealed, except for those bare ankles and toes—more than enough nudity to tempt a grizzled old man whose greatest pleasure on the new year was to pour ale down his gob whilst watching the Mirrie Dancers in Bess Pitagowan's hearth fire.

Only for good measure, perhaps out of some misplaced sense of spite, Callum bent to nuzzle her neck, and then he couldn't help himself; he sniffed her hair, before meeting auld Douglass's curious gaze.

The faintest scent of roses caught his breath...

"Go back to your pints," he demanded of Douglass, his tone brooking no argument. Then, willy-nilly, he dragged "Lord MacKinnon's plucky bride" back to the room.

God's bloody bones, he should have been too tired and far too nettled to sport an arousal, but she smelled so fine. It was all he could do not to resort to some primitive yearning to toss the lady over his shoulders and tote her back to his bed—his bed.

Damn him to perdition, he was too bloody tired to argue over it, but for both their sakes, he released her the instant they entered the room, then kicked the door shut behind them.

Once safely inside, his angel of mercy wasted very little time in finding her mettle, retreating behind her tiny valise as though it were Hadrian's Wall. "How dare you!" she said again, and her expression was furious.

"Ach, lass. Didn't ye say ye were wedding the MacKinnon?"

"Lord MacKinnon," she corrected him again. But the simple fact was that no Act of Proscription could strip Callum of his birthright. They might brand him a traitor, but he was still the rightful heir of Clan MacKinnon. As the eldest surviving member of a clan that was descended of Kenneth MacAlpin, he was now chieftain, and he'd be damned if he'd let his title go without a fight, particularly if this woman was somehow to be his prize.

"I am laird MacKinnon," he announced, as he found and sat on the bed, with a sudden new ache to worry about—one that was beginning to form a tent of his breeches. Callum hid the evidence of his discomfort from her delicate view, suddenly reticent although he'd

never been bashful a day in his life. However, at the moment, he bloody well wished he had her shawl.

Adjusting himself appropriately, he cast the woman a sour glance, finding her staring, open-mouthed, and he nearly asked her if she was looking to catch flies.

"But it can't be."

"I assure you I am who I say I am," he insisted.

"But... h-he's..."

"Dead?"

"No, he's not dead. Though he's just a boy!"

"He is fifteen," said Callum. "I'm the eldest, by far, but if you prefer my younger brother, I can still arrange it."

Open-mouthed still, she pinched her shawl before her, looking every bit as though she might swoon. "B-But... I don't understand."

Callum heaved a sigh. "Ach, lass. What's there tae understand? I'm back from the dead. Ye're among the first tae know it." Then he narrowed his eyes. "In fact, I'm on my way home—a rather convenient coincidence, I might add."

She blinked disbelievingly. "Are you really?"

"Really what?"

"Lord MacKinnon?"

"I am now," he said with no small measure of disgust. "My Da took a bullet at Falkirk. I would ha'e, as well... were it not for the bloody bastard who shot my Da. So, ye see, here I am by the good graces of a Wolfe."

"Hmmm," she said, casting her head down to assess her wiggling toes. She looked as though she had something more to say... but, for the moment, Callum was heartily relieved she wasn't looking directly at him. Even now, he held back tears that longed to be shed. Only once, after rousing from his fever, had he cried... for the father who'd raised him so honorably and died so ignobly. God's truth, it was no way to meet one's end—with a gob full of muck. War, indeed, was hell.

"Bloody Sassenach," he said, with equal parts anger and confusion. How in the name of St. Andrew was it possible to feel so much hatred and gratitude at once?

He knew well enough that Wolfe hadn't wanted to do it, and the instant he'd had another option, he'd taken it, but it didn't change the fact that his father was dead.

Despite her confusion, Elizabeth recognized truth when she heard it.

For a moment, she stared at her bare feet, unable to find even a modicum of chagrin over their nudity. For some odd reason, she felt entirely comfortable in this man's presence. "So then," she said. "If you are..."

"I am."

"Then... I suppose..."

He gave her a nod. "You're betrothed to me," he finished.

She blushed hotly.

"That... is... indeed..."

"Convenient?"

Elizabeth nodded, wondering how much James had had to do with this very awkward happenstance. Without a bit of help, it seemed entirely unbelievable that she would discover herself ensconced here at this very inn only to be thrust into the same room with her intended—unless, it was... planned?

Or... by some miracle, the fates had intervened.

But nay... Elizabeth blinked with dawning comprehension: Her cousin had returned from Culloden in the dourest of moods. He'd ensconced himself for hours and hours with his father, then emerged from Uncle Edward's office with renewed purpose.

It wasn't very long after that meeting that Elizabeth had been told about her betrothal—to a Highlander, no less. When she'd protested, James had privately reassured her that she would be well pleased with the match, and what was more, he'd said: It would serve her sensibilities far, far better than it would to marry some fat, greasy English lord.

In fact, she wasn't particularly well endowed, and her most recent inquiry had been from an elderly gentleman whose gout hadn't allowed him to serve in the King's army.

Naturally, with James' reassurances, she'd acquiesced. It was only later—much later—when she'd discovered she was actually betrothed to a boy, that she'd felt like socking her cousin in the nose. She'd been irate all over again, although she took some small comfort in the fact that through their affiliation she might, indeed, be able to save a venerable clan.

James was right after all; It spoke to her inner crusader.

Even despite that she didn't entirely understand the political upheaval, or the Scot's lament, she knew enough to know that it was not entirely fair to call these men traitors—men who'd fought, not so much for Bonnie Prince Charlie as they had for their way of life.

In the end, James must also have felt the same, because the walls were not so thick as her uncle liked to believe. She knew her cousin had defied a direct order and freed a Scotman...

That man, she realized, must be Callum MacKinnon.

She opened her mouth to ask him a question, then closed it again, realizing that this was no act of God. Was Mrs. Grace also aware of the circumstances, or was she not part of the plot?

She had a difficult time believing Mrs. Grace would go along with such a farce. Nor could she fathom that James trusted Mrs. Grace more than he trusted Elizabeth.

Therefore, it stood to reason that if he hadn't revealed the sham to her, no doubt he'd never deign to tell such a proper woman as Mrs. Grace.

And then, too... what excuse had James provided for not being able to travel with them? He'd said only that he had some debt of honor to see to. And now, she had a good suspicion as to what that debt of honor must be.

Really, her cousin was a very well-respected man; there was no wonder he'd achieved the rank of brigade major by the age of eighteen, but he wasn't a bootlicker.

Her uncle Edward like to say that it would either gain James a place in history, or it would get him to an early grave. Right now, Elizabeth suspected it might prove to be an early grave—particularly if she ever got hold of him.

"James," she said crossly, and the hint of a crooked smile that was beginning to form

on Callum MacKinnon's face suddenly fled—and, yes, he was handsome, she decided. Ruggedly so.

“What did ye say?”

Elizabeth arched a brow. “Please tell me, who shot your father?”

“Major James Wolfe,” he said, eyeing her pointedly.

“But of course,” she said, fidgeting under his scrutiny, and then she sighed and confessed, “That blackguard is my cousin.”

Chapter 5

As it were, the only true angel at work this holiday was James.

It was, indeed, Callum MacKinnon he owed the debt to and evidently, after leaving Westerham, he'd tracked Callum to some blackhouse in Alyth, offering him a horse and enough money to travel with, along with papers to carry, all signed and sealed by her Uncle Edward.

The proof was all there; Callum showed her all the documents—all quite official.

And then, with an undeniably heavy heart, he told Elizabeth the rest of his tale—all of it, sparing nothing, not even the manner of his father's death.

They were both ordered to be executed under General Hawley's custody. His father was shot with hands bound, and neither man was armed. Her cousin James had pulled the trigger, but then, after Hawley left, he let Callum go.

Elizabeth could have relayed the rest of the story herself...

James had returned home in a terrible state. She had never seen him so downcast, and, in truth, she had suspected something of this magnitude, because, along with those bits and pieces she'd overheard, she knew her cousin well enough that, if he had kept the truth from her, he was likely ashamed. But she didn't wish to interrupt Callum, so she let him purge his grief, taking his hand when it seemed he might weep. It was a very humbling experience to watch a grown man grieve. And yet, he did not cry; although his bottom lip quivered ever so slightly, he remained strong, and all the while Elizabeth listened patiently until their conversation was interrupted by the innkeeper, who finally arrived bearing a wooden tub.

As Callum stood to converse with Mr. Pitagowan, Elizabeth laid his papers down on the bed, studying the man...

She could do worse.

He was a fine, fine specimen—no boy in him at all.

His thick, broad shoulders bespoke a lifetime of hard labor, and his skin, though pale in the midst of winter, and after an epoch of healing, was still a shade of bronze.

Evidently, he was a friend to Pitagowan family. They spoke with an ease borne of familiarity, and the elder man gave Callum his regrets, telling him of Carrie's mission to recover her Uncle's belongings, which were lost or stolen after he fell. The room, so Elizabeth discerned, was her "Chamber of Sorrows," filled with items belonging to the brave men who fell at Culloden. Every now and again, against his and her mother's wishes, the plucky young lady took a horse and cart north. That was the only reason that

her room was empty.

As promised, Mr. Pitagowan left Little Joe to fill the bath, and he went to retrieve not one, but two bowls of Scotch broth with bannocks.

Immediately on the heels of Little Joe's departure arrived yet another stack of firewood for the hearth, along with soap, towels, a pitcher of ale and two cups.

But that wasn't all; Bess arrived with a dessert that consisted of oats, raspberries, cream and whisky—made especially for Callum.

"It's time to celebrate!" she announced as she laid her whisky drenched cranachan down upon a small table. "Back from the dead, with a bride no less!"

She winked at Elizabeth, and said, "Callum won't be sayin' so, mind ye, but 'e always had the ladies in a swoon. You're a lucky lady!"

Elizabeth nodded dumbly, as she accepted a brimming cup of ale, then gulped it down, grateful for the alcohol's calming effect. After a moment, Bess, too, departed, leaving her alone with her "betrothed."

Only now, wondering over the particulars, Elizabeth considered whether she ought to go apprise Mrs. Grace of the shocking turn of events.

"It all makes sense now," she told Callum as he spooned the steaming broth into his mouth. "James insisted I leave for Dunmore at once. And then, he departed without so much as a by your leave. Naturally, I wondered where he was off to in such haste. Now, I know."

Callum nodded very soberly, setting down his bowl, although he didn't yet sit. Her hand drifted into the spot on the bed he had occupied before, feeling for his fading warmth.

"So it seems," he said. "He came to assure me my passage was safe, and then he also insisted I leave at once. He apprised me the precise route to take, and then gave me papers to show in case I should need them."

Elizabeth tilted her head. "But he didn't tell you to stop here, did he? What made you do that?" she asked, curiously.

Callum shrugged. "I don't know. I was damp to my bones. I knew Bess and John well enough to know they'd give me a bed for the night, and a thick bowl of stew. But most of all, I suppose the thought of arriving home wasn't entirely without its sorrow."

"I can only imagine," she said, and now he came and sat beside her on the bed, but not too close. He hesitated a moment, then removed a ribbon of tartan from his pocket to show her.

"They burned the rest of his plaid along with his body, and mine as well, but the lady who tended me cut me a piece. She gave it to me before I left."

Red, green with a hint of white.

"The MacKinnon plaid?" she surmised.

He nodded glumly, looking for the moment like a wee little boy.

Elizabeth didn't understand what it was about a small scrap of cloth that the Scot's found so worthy of dying for. And nevertheless, she didn't need to understand to appreciate the fervor with which they applied themselves. They loved their tartans as fiercely as they loved their families... and their land... and now, so it seemed, it wasn't

legal to have either...

But she needn't marry the man for pity's sake. There were English guards out in the yard; and knowing what she knew, she could call upon them, and they would arrive with due force, and very likely execute Callum for merely possessing that small scrap.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He shrugged, and said, "In the end, I suppose I wasn't looking forward to providing details." He winced, as though the memory offered him a new blow to the gut.

Elizabeth asked gently, without intending injury, "Don't you think they should know by now?"

"Aye," he said. "But it's the how of it I'm dreading, lass."

Elizabeth reached over to lay a few fingers on his bare arm, and the touch gave her a shock, startling her. She pulled her hand away as he peered up at her, his blue eyes glittering, oh so fiercely. The silence that fell between them stretched interminably...

"So, then... are ye keen for the match?" he asked, finally. "With my brother, Lachlan—I must assume it's Lachlan?"

Elizabeth lifted a shoulder. "I wasn't opposed, if that's what you're asking."

"Aye, lass, but is it Lachlan ye're wanting?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "I have never met him."

He lifted a brow then, and said, "I am guessing your cousin's intention was that I would return in time tae take his place at the altar. Tis as heavy-handed a scheme as I've ever encountered."

Elizabeth nodded. "And yet... I'm certain he meant well."

He peered down at the ribbon, pulling it between his thumb and forefinger. "Aye, lass... I'm sure he did. Canny lad," he said, smiling ruefully. "For a Sassenach..." His smile widened then, and Elizabeth's heart tripped a few beats.

He lifted his brow. "I'm also guessing he knew, as my brother must have known, that the only chance of us getting through this with our lands is to align ourselves with the English. Your uncle, precisely?"

"Elizabeth nodded, picking nervously at a thumbnail, understanding the implication. "Yes, well... I can assure you my uncle Edward hasn't the least intent to profit from your lands."

"Mayhap not," said Callum, "And yet he will."

Alas, it was Elizabeth's turn to sigh, because, of course, it was true. It would be dishonest to deny it. Some lands were already being appropriated, and forfeited to the Crown. Callum's lands, all but a portion, would be assigned to her uncle and leased to his family. All produce attained from MacKinnon lands would be offered first to the King's regiments, who were bound to be permanent fixtures about Scotland in order to keep the King's peace. "I could... go... home," she offered, realizing she didn't want to.

His smile persisted. "Or you could marry my brother?" he said.

Elizabeth met his gaze, sensing a question in his eyes even as they softened to regard her, and she felt...

Something...

Chapter 6

Something about the way she'd slid her hand across the bed... into the warm spot he'd left behind... it spoke to Callum like nothing ever had. He'd found himself wishing he was still seated there beside her, if only to find her hand... The thought ignited a fire in his veins that he suddenly realized he didn't want to go out.

For a moment, Callum merely stared at her, wondering how the devil to propose, and whether he truly wanted to...

On the one hand, he loathed being manipulated; it would serve that wretch right if his cousin married his brother as planned, but poor Lachlan wouldn't know what to do with her. Although he'd very clearly already accepted the betrothal on behalf of the family, he'd probably done so without ever knowing what his bride even looked like or how fiery her spirit—and, oh, that she was. He sensed it keenly, even as she sat so primly beside him, her thumbs twirling nervously in her lap. The gesture endeared her to him as surely as did the blush in her cheeks... and the flowering of hope in her eyes.

So then, he recognized the boon he'd been offered, and... yes, indeed, there must be such a thing as miracles, because here sat one beside him—with golden-red hair, and eyes as blue as cornflowers. And suddenly, he couldn't bear the thought of her marrying his brother. She was a woman, through and through, and shouldn't be wasted on a boy.

And anyway, he knew Lachlan well enough to know that the burden of leadership would be too much for him to bear. Callum was eldest by thirteen years, and Lachlan was scarcely fifteen. The rest of his brothers were eleven, eight and four, and their wee sister's birth saw their mother gone from this world, barely a year before the Forty Five Rebellion.

Therefore, this was the only logical conclusion...

"Else... you could... marry me," he said, and found he meant it. He knew a good thing when he saw one, no matter how conspiratorially it was delivered.

Indeed, whatever feelings he had about her cousin, they were already growing ambivalent—on the one hand loathing James for killing his father, on the other, grateful as hell for, not only setting him free, but for seeing to it that he had safe passage home to his family... and a future and home to return to...

"You never gave me your name..."

"Elizabeth Louise," she said, and Callum smiled, because the name didn't suit her. It was far too conventional and he had a sense she was anything but.

"Aye, well, Elizabeth Louise..."

He slid from the bed and fell to his knee, hitching up his chin. "If you'll do me the honor of becoming my bride, I shall promise to provide for you to the best of my ability and I will honor and cherish you as a man should honor and cherish his wife."

Elizabeth blinked.

Was he truly asking her to marry him?

On his knees?

The gesture was so intensely sweet that she felt a sting of tears spring to her eyes. Long, long ago, when she was still just a wee girl... she'd dreamt of a moment like this. And with every year that passed, without a proper suitor, nor prospects that weren't stodgy and old, she'd lost all hope of love with marriage. And though it seemed she mustn't truly have a choice, this man... this stranger... was giving her one...

She could return home, even to the dismay of her uncle and her cousin.

Her father had never cared one whit what her desires might be, and even now, he was traveling God knew where. Her uncle wouldn't like it if she muddled his plans, but neither would he disown her. In fact, he had given her this choice to begin with, as distasteful as it might have seemed, and Elizabeth had chosen to come here of her own free will, in order to help restore a family's good name. So why shouldn't she still do so?

Simply because it no longer seemed a matter of charity?

Even as Callum knelt before her, asking for her hand, she knew he would honor whatever decision she arrived at. If she asked him to allow it, he would send her back to Westerham, and he would... what? Return home to face his own dispossession?

And what about her cousin? She knew well enough that the only reason James wasn't being court marshaled for having freed his charge was because, first of all, until now, there hadn't been proof. Callum MacKinnon hadn't yet returned from the dead. Although her cousin was now commissioned to his father's regimen, and he was under Uncle Edward's protection, it wouldn't suit either of them if it became known... unless, James and Uncle Edward had some way to reassure the Crown that its interests were being met. Unfortunately for Callum, it was only their marriage contract that could save him from the gibbet. Eventually, unless he too had her Uncle's protection, he would answer for his participation at Culloden...

Elizabeth studied his face... handsome, despite the small scar on the right side of his chin. She hadn't the first inkling what his brother Lachlan looked like, but it didn't matter, because he was just a boy and Callum was a man...

"Very well," she said. "I will marry you."

He grinned suddenly, clearly pleased with her answer, and now, again, he pulled the ribbon through his fingers and took her gently by the hand.

"There's an old Scot's tradition," he explained as he laid the ribbon over her wrist, and then he peered up into her eyes long enough to explain. "A man and a woman pledge vows to remain faithful for a year and a day. At the end of such time, according to our laws, ye would be free tae leave me if it be your choice... However... if ye'll have me, Elizabeth Louise, I will promise tae gi' ye no cause tae go."

Elizabeth's heart pounded fiercely; she feared he must hear it as well. She nodded,

and said, "I will."

And now, again, his smile unfurled in the most stunning display of startling white teeth as he looped his ribbon about her wrist, then tied it carefully, covering her hand with his own. He said, "As this knot is tied, so, too, will our lives be bound."

And then he nodded as though she was supposed to say something as well.

"Is that all?"

He chuckled richly. "For now," he said. "Only one more thing..." He reached up to touch her lightly upon the chin, tapping it gently, and said, "May I kiss my bride?"

Chapter 7

Elizabeth sucked in a startled breath.

The unanticipated question gave her a dizzy feeling in her head and a warm gush in the pit of her belly that didn't have a thing to do with the hearth fire, nor the ale she'd drunk, nor even the whisky in her cranachan.

How had she come to this moment so unexpectedly?

She had left home intending to become a wife and mother to a young man, but here she was, feeling like a naive little girl... seated before a grown man... who was asking sincerely for her hand in matrimony. Nay, she corrected herself... they were already "handfasted"—married in the eyes of Scot's law. Barbaric, perhaps, but simple, honest and sweet—as sweet as the promises he'd made her.

If you'll do me the honor of becoming my bride, I shall promise to provide for you to the best of my ability and I will honor and cherish you as a man should honor and cherish his wife...

Nodding jerkily, Elizabeth held her breath as he lifted himself up from one knee to press his warm lips against her trembling mouth, and if she feared it would escalate to the marriage bed thereafter, she feared for naught. He drew back, smiling at her, and then rose to his feet, and limped over to the still steaming tub, reminding her again of his injury—not one, but two.

"We'll make it proper once we're home," he said, giving her a reprieve, although truly, Elizabeth wasn't overly concerned with propriety. In fact, had she been so, she might have run screaming from the room the minute he'd arrived.

Moreover, she was very well aware that if they didn't consummate this marriage—here, and now—tonight, she was sorely afraid that everything would fall apart. After all, what if they returned "home" only to discover his brother, young as he was, meant to contest it?

And even if he didn't, what about her uncle?

It seemed perfectly obvious to Elizabeth that James had intended for Callum to intercept her before she arrived at his home, but that didn't mean Uncle Edward intended the same. For all she knew, James had carried out the last part of his mission entirely on his own.

All things considered, this "wedding" had turned out better than she'd hoped for, even if it wasn't yet official in the eyes of the law.

There was simply no help for it; if she didn't lie with her... husband... as a woman

should lie with a man... it would be too easy to challenge the handfasting.

And then a thought occurred to her... a shockingly bold idea that was stunning even for her. She had a very good sense by now that he was too much a gentleman to avail himself of a woman's body simply because he had a right to...

"May I?" she asked nervously, fiddling with the ribbon at her wrist—a wee scrap of cloth she really ought to remove, lest they brand her traitor for wearing it... and nevertheless, she shoved it higher beneath the sleeve of her chemise, emboldened by its presence.

"May ye what?" he asked, sounding confused.

"If you won't call for a doctor, may I... see to your wound?" Her gaze fell again to the slip of ribbon still peeking from beneath her sleeve. "If I can help, I would like to."

Callum swallowed, his mouth suddenly gone dry.

One wound was on his upper thigh, near his groin, the other on his shoulder. The latter was safe enough to show her, though he wasn't certain he could trust himself to allow her to minister to either. Neither would it change the healing, or the past. Still, he considered her request, reaching down to test the water—warm though cooling by the moment.

God only knew, every part of him longed to wade into that clean, fresh water and inundate himself... It would be a shame to waste Little Joe's efforts, not to mention all those buckets full of water. But the room was entirely too small, with nowhere to conceal himself... and neither would it be easy to partition, even if he dared to appropriate the bedsheets.

Moreover, he was quite certain Pitagowan didn't have spares on a night like tonight. It was the first night of Hogmanay, after all, and the inn was filled with guests.

All the worse yet, he couldn't bring himself to confess the need to conceal himself from the woman who was supposed to be his bride. That wouldn't make a bit of sense, now would it? As far as Pitagowan was concerned, they were betrothed. So, in the end, he said, "Don't worry about it, lass, I am fine."

"But I must insist," she said, standing.

"No," Callum said more firmly, although having said as much, he still wasn't certain how to handle the bath—a surprising quandary, considering that only a few hours ago he hadn't any notion for how to assuage a blushing bride. And, aye... she was blushing—a very lovely shade of pink that he would dearly love to heighten...

Unfortunately, this was neither the time or place.

On the other hand... dirty as he was, he didn't intend to crawl into that bed beside her with a week's worth of stink on his person, and, in truth, if they were going to make this marriage work, there wasn't any point in concealing himself from her. In fact, if he had his druthers, they'd share the bath together, but it only seemed proper he should offer it to her first. "Would you like to take the first bath?"

"Oh, no!" she said quickly. "Thank you. I can wait."

"Sadly, I cannot," Callum confessed. "There's only one bed and I'd no' repulse ye with my scent."

“Y-yes... I-I... understand,” she said.

And then, for a very, very long awkward moment, they simply stared at one another—an odd form of checkmate—until there was nothing left to be done, but to show her his bum...

Chapter 8

Truth be told, Elizabeth wasn't sure why she'd declined the bath—wasn't that that best, most efficient way to get them both undressed?

Indeed, it was.

And still, she didn't know what to do.

Should she stay?

Should she go?

Should she turn her back to him?

Or maybe ask if he needed her help to undress?

In the meantime, there was a bath going to waste; and nevertheless, she wasn't entirely prepared when he shrugged off his shirt and tossed it over to the bed beside her.

She opened her mouth to speak, not at all sure it was a protest, and then closed it again as he began to fumble with his trousers. The heat in her cheeks began to blaze.

"You might like to turn your head," he said with a hint of a smile, and she did, at once, focusing her attention on the door, half anticipating it to fly open and to find Mrs. Grace's disapproving gaze behind it. At the instant, though she hadn't yet done a bloody thing to initiate her plan, she felt guilty as charged—or rather, as she might be charged. She was behaving like doxy, no less. Would he think her one if she did what she wished to do?

Lordy, she hadn't the nerve

Where now her fearlessness?

Where now her mettle?

Unwittingly, her gaze fell to the ribbon of tartan peeking out from beneath her sleeve, and she fiddled with the cloth, discombobulated.

"It rather surprises me that your cousin would allow you to travel so far alone," he said conversationally.

"Oh, I'm not alone," she reassured, and then she heard him slip into the tub, and immediately thereafter heard him heave a contented sigh. Sweet lord, the sound was nearly as intoxicating as the whiskey in her belly, though she wished now that she'd asked for more—at least then she might have the nerve to finish what she hadn't yet had the courage to start.

"You're not?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I came with my chaperone—Mrs. Grace. If it's acceptable to you, she would like to stay on to help... when we... er... arrive... home."

"Aye, well, tis ye're home now, as well," he said with a thickening burr, and then he heaved another sigh as he slid more fully into the tub.

"Yes, I suppose that's true," she said.

"It is."

He sounded so sure...

Trying desperately to rein in her nerve, Elizabeth nipped at her bottom lip, making it burn over the self-abuse, nervous, but loathed to confess it. She had always considered herself to be far more... fearless. It was infinitely more difficult than she had ever supposed... to speak to someone whilst in the same room... and not... look into their face—while they were loitering in a bath. But this wasn't such a shocking thing, was it?

It used to be in the olden days... the lady of the house would bathe, not merely her husband, but his guests as well. It was really very innocent—except... it wasn't. At the moment, she very definitely had an ulterior motive—did he suspect?

By now, the steam from the bath was beginning to thicken in the room... or mayhap it was merely that she felt overheated. The fire in the hearth must be blazing hot, and yet, she couldn't seem to find it within her to even glance at the hearth, since that happened to be on the very same side of the room with her now naked groom.

Unexpected, though he found it, Callum was enjoying her company, despite himself. She was endearing, he decided, as he stared at her lovely, round backside.

He couldn't help himself; he grinned, and then, the very act of doing so was startling, because it was the first time he'd smiled so genuinely in eight long months.

Ye gods, they were handfasted now, married according to common law. He hadn't lied to her, and indeed, he would allow her the time and space she needed to decide on her own if she wished to remain at Dunmore, and more importantly to remain as his wife.

Lachlan, too, would respect whatever decision she came to, and Callum had every intention of leaving her chaste until they could all get into a room together to decide their fates.

The problem was... Callum wasn't a saint, and though she was no longer revealed before the fire, he could still spy the tantalizing outline of her fine form beneath the diaphanous gown, and he fought a battle with his demons to confess as much.

In the end, he decided she needn't know, since it would indubitably embarrass her. But God help him, she had a fine, fine form... a narrow waist his hands ached to cradle... a pert, round bottom that offered him an intriguing view of the shadow beneath... the very sight made him dizzy, and it wasn't only from the heat of the water...

Really, despite her bashfulness, he sensed an inherent strength in the lass, evident even now in the set of her shoulders. Having committed herself to their union, she didn't dress herself and leave in protest of his nudeness. Nor did she rail at him for having availed himself of the tub. She simply accepted the truth, and, just as he had, she'd honed in on the most favorable outcome.

Nay indeed, he wouldn't rush her, nor push her into anything rash, but that didn't stop his body from hardening, nor did it ease the discomfort of his sudden, unreasonable desire.

Bloody hell... here he was... on the eve of a new year, enjoying a nice, hot bath... in the company of his lovely new bride... and still he was honor bound to keep his todger to himself—hell and damnation.

How he adored those tiny curls at her nape... most likely not the effect of any iron. But rather, having been dampened by the weather, they were naturally curling.

"I was thinking... after my bath, should we summon your chaperone and tell her the good news? Maybe share a pint of ale with her?"

"Hmm," she said, sounding confused. And then she added, "No, I don't think so."

"Why not, lass? Do ye plan to change your mind?" He hadn't a clue why he said it so defiantly, but the very notion curdled the dessert in his belly. "If so, I should warn ye, I mean to hold ye to our bargain..."

Evidently, that was all it took to chase away her shyness; her gaze narrowed and she spun about to pierce him with an angry glower. Only the sight of his smile disarmed her, and whatever it was she was about to say, she thought better of it. "You're jesting," she said, with no small trace of relief.

"Indeed, I am."

"That's a very good thing," she said, with a smile, and Callum lifted his brow, amused.

Good Heavens.

Elizabeth knew she ought to look away. Propriety dictated as much, and yet... and yet... she couldn't seem to make herself do it.

And now that she was looking, she did so greedily, secretly thrilling to the sight of her husband's male form.

His smile was achingly beautiful and his storm-blue eyes so full of mischief—like a naughty little boy, but there was nothing so little about him.

He couldn't possibly have realized she would take such offense at his suggestion. She was a woman of her honor, and she wouldn't back down—even if she did suddenly feel like flying out the door. At any rate, where would she go?

Not to Mrs. Grace, that much was certain. That was the last thing she would do as she didn't want her chaperone to know anything until their vows were already consummated and there was nothing anyone could do to prevent it.

He scooped down now, with a knee lifted from the water, and otherwise buried to his chin. Steam rose from the tub, like fine ribbons of smoke, and much to Elizabeth's dismay, her gaze found his shoulder and locked on the small puckered wound there. "Does it hurt?" she asked, well aware that his hand slid through the tub, in a direction and fashion she daren't contemplate. "Yes," he said. "Very much."

"It appears to be healing," she said. "What about the one on your leg?"

Chapter 9

“Healing,” he said.

“Oh.”

Every last bit of good will Callum had mustered suddenly vanished with the steam rising from his tub. It had been far too long since he’d been with a woman and even now, as he brushed his hand across his cock to shove it down between his thighs to conceal it... white, hot desire pulsed through his veins, and heat rose into his unshaven face—another thing he meant to remedy. Until now, he hadn’t had any good reason to shave, but suddenly he had delightful visions of diving into her soft muff, curious for the taste of his wife.

His wife.

His wife.

His. Wife.

Before he could wrap his brain about that fact, and before he could warn her to stay away, she advanced upon the tub, setting his heart to pounding.

“I am no doctor,” she said. “But you might as well show me since I am now your wife. If there is anything at all I can do to ease your pain, I will certainly try.”

“You can’t,” he said, through gritted teeth and he would have thrust up a hand to hold her back, but he daren’t release the kraken in his tub. “Elizabeth,” he said, as she knelt, and the word came out of his throat with a tortured groan.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle,” she promised.

Callum groaned again, though she’d yet to even touch him.

“Where is it?” she demanded.

“Where is what?” Surely, she didn’t mean the beast between his thighs? That was hidden if only for the moment, but not for long, because even as the scent of her reached his nostrils, enhanced by the steam from the tub, his erection thickened and throbbed, threatening to free itself of all restraints.

“Elizabeth!” he protested again, as her hand dove into the water, and Callum twisted uncomfortably as she brushed his thigh.

Elizabeth didn’t know what got into her, but having reassured herself that this was the best course of action, she was now determined.

She didn’t wish to marry a boy. She wanted to marry a man—this man.

And neither was she entirely ignorant of what must be done. She understood the

dangers of being in such close proximity with a naked man. In fact, that was precisely the end result she anticipated. She merely lacked the skills to know how to get what she wanted without asking for it, and no matter that she had always considered herself to be quite outspoken and yes, even intrepid, she didn't anticipate the words that came out of her mouth.

"What?" she asked innocently. "If you won't allow me to tend to your wound, I must help you wash. Therefore, I am searching for the soap."

"That is my... leg," he said.

"Of course it is—because you blocked my hand."

"The soap," he declared. "Is still in my hand."

Elizabeth smiled coyly. "Oh."

"You don't want to wash me," he said.

"Oh, but I do! It's the least I can do."

He frowned. "No, it isn't."

Elizabeth batted her lashes. "Well, I can't very well sit about like an empty headed miss whilst you bathe," she reasoned.

He was still scowling at her. "Of course, you can."

"My lord, in case you didn't realize, that is insulting," Elizabeth said. "Women are not objects to be passively admired. I would therefore like to be of use," she said more firmly.

"Elizabeth," he warned, the sound of her name already achingly familiar on his lips.

Elizabeth's heart beat wildly. The scent of him so close was intoxicating—a combination of sweat, horse and ... man. It made her nostrils flare and she inched closer to catch another whiff...

Holy Christ in heaven above, Callum thought.

She's too close—too close!

Neither did he miss the delicate flare of her nostrils as she inhaled his masculine scent and the not-so subtle way it drew her closer for another sniff. Ach, God, she was his wife now, and despite that he'd sworn not to avail himself of her bountiful gifts, it was all he could do to keep his head. "Elizabeth," he said hoarsely, as she moved even closer.

"Callum," she said, and God help him, that single word was like a balm to his wounded heart. It soothed him in a way that the healer's efforts never could.

In fact, at the moment, his greatest ache was not the injury on his shoulder nor the one on his thigh... it was the one in his heart... and the one now throbbing between his legs.

Helplessly caught in the prison of her eyes, he released his hold on his cock and let it slip, to rise to a full salute. At the feel of it cresting the water, he swallowed convulsively, and though she must have heard the thrashing of water, she didn't immediately appear to notice.

He seized her by the wrist, reveling in the feel of his tartan ribbon still bound there. "Elizabeth," he said again, and the sound was as much a plea as he dared.

He wanted to command her to leave the room, but, in truth, deep down he sensed

that this woman's affection was exactly what could save him... not only tonight, but for all time.

As he stood there, basking in the promise of her gaze, he was like a drowning man reaching for a line...

There needn't be any words spoken...

Not now.

Elizabeth had never been more certain of anything in all her life.

Gone was the effort of pretense. Her woman's heart reveled in the feel of his strong hand closed about her wrist. Her nipples pebbled against her gown, fully revealed by the water that had splashed upon her chemise. His gaze was drawn there, as well, and he, too, swallowed, the hunger in his gaze making her feel... empowered.

"Am I not your wife?" she asked softly, sensually, sensing the moment could turn as he attempted to compose himself.

"You are."

"Then make it so, in truth."

He swallowed again, visibly, the apple in his throat bobbing. "Art certain?"

Elizabeth nodded with certainty, and then, if she had second thoughts they fled as he drew her into the tub, soaking her chemise to the flesh. She gasped in surprise, hardly having anticipated this—not quite this. He sat as he embraced her, cradling her in his arms as his lips unerringly found her mouth. Hungrily, they explored her, suckling and lapping in turn, coaxing her to open for him...

Suddenly famished for something more than food, Callum held his wife close, reveling in the feel of her in his arms.

She stiffened, though only for a moment, as she settled over his lap, no doubt feeling the heat of his manhood rising to seek her mons—silky, sweet and wet.

He groaned with desire, the sound no longer tortured but ravenous. Her body was like a bounty laid before a wasting man, and he was not strong enough to deny her.

"Elizabeth," he said, once more, if only because honor compelled him. "If we do this now, there will be no turning back. You'll be my wife, in truth."

She smiled mischievously, and he wondered why. Was she already deflowered? Had she come to him with another man's seed in her womb? It wasn't unheard of and she was far too bold to be a virgin, but still...

His hand found and sought the lips he craved. Without warning, he slid a finger between her slick folds, and then once inside, he found the barrier he sought, and stopped, only slightly surprised. She was a virgin—a virgin with intelligence and passion. He could see the fire burning in her beautiful blue eyes... undisguised desire with an unbridled honesty to reveal it.

What was more, she knew, as he knew, that a willing consummation of this union meant they would be bound hereafter... so be it.

She moaned softly as his finger continued to explore, and, finally, she sagged into his arms as Callum deepened his kiss, mimicking with his tongue the rhythm he longed to

show her elsewhere, knowing in his heart that she was everything he needed.

If, in fact, he'd lost his faith, this woman would restore it—no doubt she had already done so, judging by the lift of his spirit.

He didn't know if the water would make her first time easier, but he was so hard he didn't want to wait. And besides, when they were through, he would bathe her himself, reveal and worship every inch of her body...

Chapter 10

This wasn't precisely how Elizabeth thought it might go—never had she imagined he would take her right here in the tub. And yet, there was nothing about their union that felt wrong. Somehow, every touch of his hands on her body felt oh, so right. When he found her most private place, and boldly touched her woman's flower, she sagged against him, reveling in the hardness she encountered beneath her, and greedy in a way she had never anticipated. Her body seemed to have a hunger and will of its own, instinctively knowing what it should seek...

She repositioned herself fully over his searing erection, thrilling over the feel of it as it also seemed to find a life of its own, slipping and seeking between them until it found the hollow it sought, nestling itself hotly between her thighs.

"Ye're mine," he said, as though he couldn't believe it. "Mine, mine, mine..."

And then his arms enfolded her greedily, his hands pulling and tugging at her wet chemise, only to give up when he found it irrevocably stuck to her flesh—all the more so with every pass of his soaking hands. The flimsy material melded against Elizabeth's skin.

His gaze clouding with passion, he abandoned the garment, and so did she as his hands fell to both sides of her hips, lifting her ever so gently in order to settle her more conveniently over his arousal, and then, she gasped with new delight at the feel of his shaft pressing slowly, but firmly into her body... claiming her once and for all. Her heart hammered against her ribs in anticipation, and she knew the instant he encountered her maidenhead. Only when it seemed he might hesitate, she wouldn't allow it. She sank down over him, taking him fully into her body, crying out over the thickness of him inside her.

"Oh, my!" she said, and he grinned.

"Ach, lass, I'll have my hands full with you."

Elizabeth smiled because, indeed, he would.

Indeed, he would.

His fingers dug into her waist, clutching her desperately as he rocked against her, until she thought she would die with pleasure.

Oh, my...

This wasn't at all like Mrs. Grace had warned.

She had thought there must be pain, but no, indeed, there was none. There was only pleasure so intense she thought she might weep.

She adored the way his broad chest felt beneath her palms, loved the way his body

melted into her own, loved the way he was looking at her right now...

They moved together in the tub, slowly at first, dancing a primal dance, hands exploring, mouths entwined, tongues exploring...

God's truth, this was not how Callum had anticipated the holiday might go. It was hardly the way he'd anticipated returning home—with a new wife en tow. And yet, suddenly, in that instant, he knew in his heart that everything would be all right...

I would be a good year, indeed.

He vowed to honor his pledge—to give this woman no reason to leave him, ever, because he suddenly, without any doubt understood that without her he couldn't be whole.

It had been so long since he'd lain with a woman that he came too quickly, giving her his seed, and then, because he knew instinctively that she didn't understand what had happened, he rose from the tub lifting up his beautiful wife to carry her to the bed.

Once there, he made love to her, still hard as stone though he shouldn't be, and he was stunned to discover that, even as he stroked and teased her to fruition, he hardened again. And this time, when he felt her body shudder with release, he covered her mouth with his own, greedy for the taste of her, and jealous enough not to want anyone else to overhear her cries of pleasure.

"Oh, my," she said again, breathlessly, and he grinned down at her, reluctant to separate even still. He couldn't stop, not yet, still sensitive with pleasure though he lifted himself enough so he could fill his eyes with her beauty. And when she smiled at him, her eyes so full of promise he came once more, the culmination so intensely pleasurable that he lifted his head back and stifled a primal howl.

Outside the chamber, all throughout the scullery and tavern, voices rose with huzzahs and shouts of "slàinte mhath!" It took Callum a full moment to realize they weren't shouting hallelujahs for him... The clock must have struck twelve.

The first day of Hogmanay.

The first day of the rest of his life.

"Happy New Year, missus MacKinnon," he said with a grin.

"Happy New Year," she cooed.

Epilogue

One year later...

Callum MacKinnon cornered his wife at the top of the stairs, sweeping her into an embrace to keep her from going down to corral the children—not their own as yet, though he longed to hold a wee one in his arms, a sweet little girl, like her mother.. with darling little freckles on her nose, a mischievous little grin more like his own, and an irrefutable sass she would come by honestly through both her parents.

“Callum,” she protested. “First footing will be upon soon... there’s still so much so do.” He loved that she was developing the barest hint of a brogue.

Together a full year this Hogmanay, he wanted to celebrate a wee moment just the two of them. Alice, their housemaid, along with Mrs. Grace to supervise her, was already well on the way to supplying the entire village with black buns. All he wanted from his lovely wife was two minutes alone to reveal his gift for her—his mother’s wedding band, hers to keep as the lady of Dunmore. “The neighbors can wait,” he said silkily, dragging her back into his arms when she tried to flee. “I’ve something tae give you, my beautiful wife.”

Her brows lifted, her attention piqued. They were still in the process of rebuilding Dunmore and their funds were tight as ticks on a dog in winter.

“A gift?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Aye, but dinna be so surprised, mo chroí.” The use of his Gaelic tongue still wasn’t entirely safe, but he had nothing to hide from his wife. “First I should ask... do ye mean to leave?”

Her brows drew together in confusion. “Leave?”

“Me,” he said, hitching his chin at her wrist, at the slip of ribbon she still wore hidden beneath her sleeve, knowing the answer before she gave it.

She squeezed him lovingly, lifting herself up on tippy toes to press her warm lips against his. “No, I’m afraid not, my love; you’re stuck with me.”

“Ach, then,” he said, with feigned disappointment. “In that case...” He fished a small box out of his pocket to hand it to her.

With blooming cheeks and wide blue eyes she accepted it, making short work of the ribbons, opening it to reveal a simple braided band—a silver ring that had been in his family’s possession since his ancestor, Iain MacKinnon had it fashioned for his wife to present to her on her sixtieth birthday.

"Oh, my... it's beautiful," she said, fingering the ring, with its delicate etchings—fine Celtic knots. And then she slid the ring on her finger, and lifted her hand to better inspect it.

"It belonged to my mother," explained Callum. "And her mother before her. I wanted ye to have it."

"Thank you," she said, looking up at him with such love that it squeezed at his heart. "I—"

Something exploded, and there was an inexplicable clatter downstairs in the general vicinity of the drawing room. Nothing good, Callum thought as he released his wife, and ran down the stairs to find what had transpired.

Elizabeth arrived only seconds behind him.

Lachlan and Rory stood facing the door, with their backs to a smoking hearth. Their faces were blackened with soot, only their wide eyes visible through smoke and ash.

The acrid scent of chemicals wafted from the room.

Elizabeth blinked, staring aghast at the boys—the young man she'd very nearly wed, and thanked God every day she had not. At Sixteen, Lachlan MacKinnon was no more a man than he was on the day they'd met. All four MacKinnon boys were present and staring at their eldest brother. "It was Lachlan's fault," claimed twelve-year old Rory.

"We wanted the fire tae be blue," explained five-year old Ailbert, with such a sober look that Elizabeth wanted to laugh.

And Fergus, at nine, had little to say. He simply pointed at Lachlan, and, Elizabeth couldn't help it. Although she was grateful that Maggie was in the kitchen with Alice, most likely poking at black buns, she did stifle a laugh.

"All o' ye, out!" demanded Callum. "Get yourselves clean!"

He needn't have said it twice. Like rats, the younger boys fled all together, the only answering sound the patter of their feet as they rushed into the hall, and rumbled up the stairs.

Only Lachlan sauntered by slowly, casting a glinting glance at Elizabeth, and giving her a conspiratorial wink before turning to his brother to say, "I'm sorry, Callum. I wasn't thinking."

"Nay ye werena'," agreed Callum. "What do ye think Isobel Percy might say if I told her what ye did here today?"

He shrugged. "I think she would laugh."

Callum smacked his brother on the back of the head as he passed by. "Aye, well, I can well assure ye her Da wadna, and if ye e'er hope to ask for the girl's hand, ye'd better be thinking twice before ye lead your brothers astray."

"Yes, sir," said Lachlan, with a sheepish grin, and Elizabeth patted him gently on the shoulder as he passed, and said, still smiling, "There's a clean set of clothes on your bed, Lachlan. Isobel and her parents should be here soon. Go wash yourself quick."

"Yes ma'am," he said, with a fond smile.

Once Lachlan was gone, Elizabeth embraced her husband, squeezing him tight. And then she lifted her ring finger again, and whispered for his ears alone, "Remind me to

thank you properly once our guests have come and gone.”

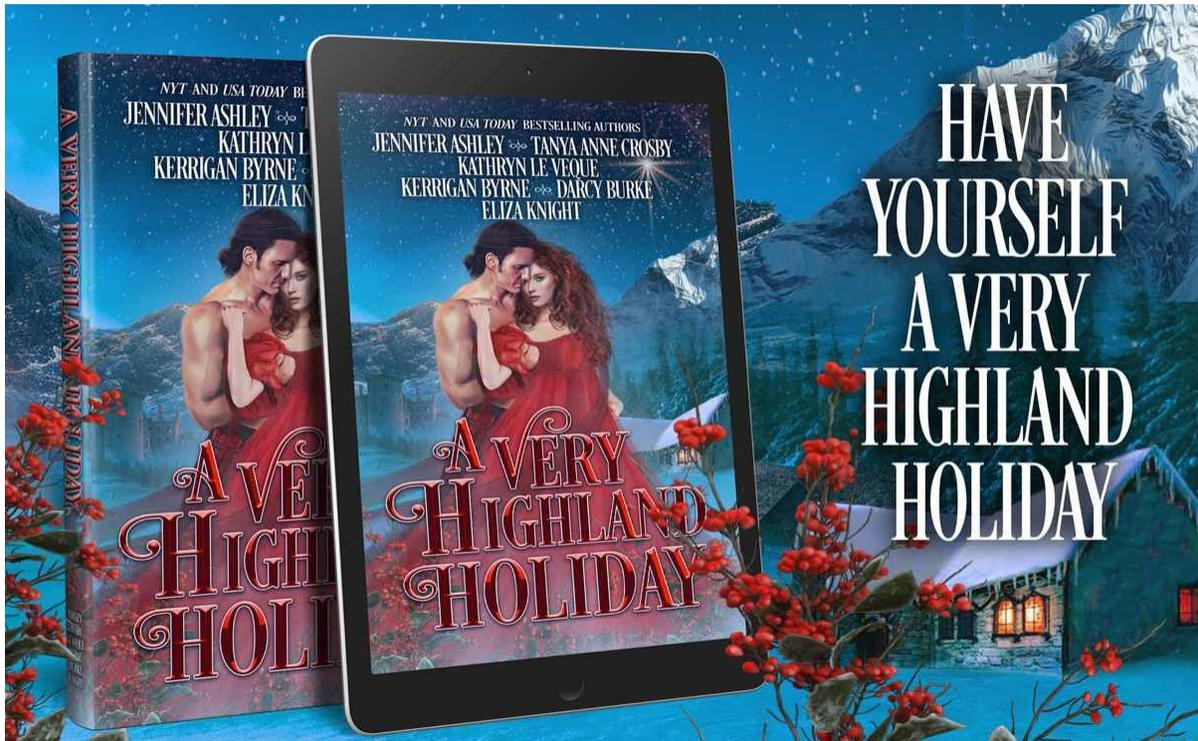
“Ach, lass,” he said. “That’s a promise that requires a toast.” And with that, he lifted his wife up to sip from the delicate cup of her mouth, drinking deeply of her love.

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About the Author



Tanya Anne Crosby is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of thirty novels. She has been featured in magazines, such as People, Romantic Times and Publisher's Weekly, and her books have been translated into eight languages. Her first novel was published in 1992 by Avon Books, where Tanya was hailed as "one of Avon's fastest rising stars." Her fourth book was chosen to launch the company's Avon Romantic Treasure imprint.

Known for stories charged with emotion and humor and filled with flawed characters Tanya is an award-winning author, journalist, and editor, and her novels have garnered reader praise and glowing critical reviews. She and her writer husband split their time between Charleston, SC, where she was raised, and northern Michigan, where the couple make their home.

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