

LINDA LOVES...?

by

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Blue Quill Books

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****Caution - some adult content and strong language****

Chapter 1

From beyond the fence a plaintive yelp rose, and the woman in the red anorak peered into the undergrowth, hoping to catch sight of her dog.

She called to him.

'Archie! Come on, boy. Where are you?'

And again.

'Archie? Come out of there. Arch?'

The dog howled again.

'I'm coming, Archie. Mummy's coming,' she called, as she followed the line of the fence looking for a weak spot. Metal mesh topped with a single row of barbed wire linking wooden posts eight feet apart. Strong, well maintained, intact.

She had no choice.

Carefully avoiding the sharp barbs, she placed her hands on the wire and pushed down on it, creating sufficient dip to get her right leg over and for her to straddle the fence, her backside brushing the short metal spikes. A slight shift in position had the toes of her wellington boots on the ground on the other side and about to pull her left leg over.

'Hey! You! Get off that fence...right now!'

The bluff Scots voice froze her in place.

Bugger. Caught in the act.

She twisted her head to look over her shoulder at a gruff looking man in a heavy waxed coat striding at a brisk pace up the path towards her. She also saw, to her consternation, the broken shotgun cradled over his arm.

He came to a halt in front of her. 'I said get off the fence, young woman. You're damaging it. Just what do you think you're doing?'

'Nothing. My dog—'

'That side of the fence is private property. You can't go in.'

'But my dog—'

'Shouldn't be in there either.'

'I heard him yelping. I think he's hurt.'

She shifted her position so she could feel the ground with her tiptoes on either side of the fence, and felt a sharp pain in her buttock as one of the savage barbs pierced her trousers and the skin beneath.

She squealed loudly.

'Will you get off, before you do yourself a mischief?' said the man impatiently.

'I can't,' she whined. 'I think...ooh, I am I'm stuck...I'm caught...my trousers are snagged.' She wafted her hand towards him. 'Help me off here. It hurts.'

'For God's sake,' he muttered, as he laid the gun on the ground and offered her a hand.

She grabbed at it - rough and calloused, yet warm and strong - and his fingers closed around hers.

They held onto each other tightly as she attempted to extricate herself from the fence without tearing either her trousers or her skin. She found she couldn't.

'It's not working,' she said.

He frowned and pulled harder.

'No! Stop pulling you silly man,' she piped shrilly. 'I'm stuck fast. I'm going to rip myself. Do something else.'

His frown deepened. 'What?'

'I don't know. Something. Anything.'

Poke. Yelp.

'Ach, for goodness sake, woman, put your arms around my neck and I'll lift you off.'

She gasped with horror. 'I'll do no such thing! How dare you. I don't even know you.'

'You want to get off or not?'

'How do I know you're not just after a quick grope?'

He let go of her hand and shrugged. 'Fine! Stay impaled. It's your choice. See if I care.'

He turned his back as if he meant to leave her stranded. The barb poked her in the bottom again and she squeaked.

'No...no, don't go. Okay, okay - help me please.'

He stood with his feet apart for balance and leaned over the fence, his face so close to hers she could smell the soap he used to wash.

She looked briefly into his grey eyes and gave him a warning squint, before putting her arms around his neck and clinging to the corduroy collar of his coat.

'Ready,' he said.

'Yes.'

'On three.'

He put his large hands under her buttocks and cradled them with a firm hold.

'One, two—'

At the count of three he took her weight, lifted her clear of the encumbrance and set her safely on her feet. He immediately stepped away from her.

'There,' he said. 'You're down.'

'Thank you.' She twirled around in an attempt to view her own backside. 'Are my pants ripped?'

He looked carefully at her presented posterior. 'No. Everything looks fine from this angle.'

'Do you mind!'

'You just asked me to look.'

She smoothed her hand over her bottom. 'Yes, alright, but not quite that closely.'

He muttered something under his breath and she gave him a hard look with her clear blue eyes in return. She then began to stride along the length of the fence.

'Is there a gate? How do I get in?'

The man picked up his gun and followed her. 'There is, but as I already said, that side of the fence is private. Didn't you hear me?'

'I heard you fine. And I said I think my dog's hurt and I need to get to him.'

She stopped in her step, cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled at the top of her voice.

'Arrrrcchiiiiieee!'

No reply. She drew in another breath.

'Is this him?'

With an incline of his head, the man indicated a stumpy, rough haired, white and tan Jack Russell terrier with a bright, inquisitive face and lolling tongue.

The woman looked down on her errant mutt.

'Yes, that's him. Come out of there, you.'

The dog squeezed himself under the mesh and she bent down to scoop the scruffy canine into her arms.

'What's his name?' the man asked. 'You were yelling so loud I didn't quite catch it.'

'Archie.'

At the sound of his name, the dog looked up at her. The man's frown disappeared and he smiled as he reached out his hand toward the dog.

'Hello there, Archie.'

Archie responded to the stranger's advance by curling his snout in a snarl and baring his small, sharp teeth.

The man, unfazed, kept his tone soft and gentle. 'Now then, Archie, there's no need for that. I'm not going to hurt you.'

He reached out his hand again. Cautiously, Archie sniffed it, and to indicate his satisfaction at the lack of threat, set his stubby tail to wagging.

'There now, you see, no harm done...to you or your mistress.'

The man stroked the dog's head and tickled behind its ears, all the while looking him over closely.

'He doesn't appear to be hurt. He's a fine looking wee chap. How old is he?'

'Six, nearly seven.'

The man looked surprised. 'Really? I thought he was just a wee pup.'

'He's always looked like a baby,' said Archie's mistress. 'He was the runt of the litter and he's hardly grown, and he doesn't seem to have aged a day.'

'Unlike the rest of us, eh? My name's Adam, by the way, Adam Strachan.' He held out his hand.

She tucked Archie under her arm and, once again, placed her hand in his. 'Linda,' she said.

His grip was gentle and the shake, light. 'Nice to meet you, Linda. What's your last name?'

'Lewis.' She let go of his hand. 'Why do you want to know?'

'I have to give you an official warning notice for trespassing on private property.'

Her eyes grew large and her mouth fell open.

'What?! You can't! I didn't even go in there...I was only half way over...that's not fair—'

The smile creeping across his face creased the small lines around his eyes.

'Oh yes, very funny,' she said dryly.

He adjusted the shotgun over his arm. 'I will have my little joke.'

'Very little,' she said, unimpressed.

'I'll let you off...this time. Take my advice, in future stick to the path. That way neither of you will get into trouble.'

'What sort of trouble?'

He patted the stock of the gun. 'I like to go shooting in these woods, and you wouldn't want anything to happen to wee Archie there, would you?'

She shook her head emphatically.

'Neither would I,' he said, and dug about in his pocket and pulled out a treat, offering it to Archie, who gave it a cursory sniff before gobbling it up.

Linda looked at him quizzically.

'I meet a lot of dogs, so I always have something in my pocket,' he said. 'Keeps me on side with the dogs, if not the owners.'

Linda set Archie down on his feet and pulled his lead from her pocket. 'Thanks again for your help getting me off the fence.'

'My pleasure.'

'Although if you hadn't yelled at me and distracted me, I would've been over.'

'I'm sure you would.'

'But I'm sorry if I was rude.'

'Nae bother.'

'I must have looked a bit silly.'

'I've seen worse.'

Silence.

'It was nice to meet you...Adam was it...and I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got to be going. I have lunch to make.'

'Then I won't keep you a moment longer and I'll bid you a very good day...Linda Lewis.'

He made a brief two-fingered salute against his cap, turned on his heel and began to walk away down the path.

He had only taken half a dozen steps when he suddenly stopped.

'I hope,' he said, turning back. 'When I come strolling along this path at around, let's say, ten o'clock tomorrow morning, I won't find you sneakily trying to climb on the fence again...will I?'

She clasped her hands to her chest. 'Good grief no! I wouldn't dream of it. That would be trespassing, wouldn't it?'

'It would indeed.'

'And I could get into a lot of trouble, couldn't I?'

He dipped his head again. 'Aye, you could.'

She took a couple of paces toward him, her fingers steepled against her lips. 'But...if Archie decides to go into the wood chasing after rabbits, there's not a lot I can do about it is there?'

'Not really.'

'And if he gets lost or hurt, I would have to climb over the fence to go and find him, wouldn't I?'

'Perhaps.'

'So if I did, and I was unfortunate enough to get stuck again - would you be around to help me down...again?'

'I might.'

She pushed her hands deep into her pockets. 'Let's hope there are plenty of rabbits then.'

Her response appeared to amuse him and he rewarded her with another smile. He touched his cap once more, turned and continued on his way down the path. Without another backward glance, he veered to his left and vanished from view into the wood. She heard the snapping of twigs under his retreating boots.

'Well, Archie, what do you make of that?'

The little dog strained his neck to look up at his mistress and gave a high-pitched yap.

'Quite right. He does seem very nice.'

Linda clipped his lead onto his collar. 'Come on, boy, let's go home.'

No sooner had she closed her kitchen door than a voice called to her from in the sitting room.

'Good walk?'

She leaned her hand against the rear doorjamb to steady herself as she took off her boots. 'Very nice thanks.'

Archie scampered to his corner of the kitchen to ensure his food had not been touched in his absence, and to avail himself a long drink from his water bowl. His thirst slaked, he climbed into his bed and settled down for a nap.

Linda hung up her coat and washed her hands, and strolled through to the living room to discover her husband, Tom, exactly where she had left him an hour and a half before – studying his laptop intently.

She curled her arms around his neck and tenderly kissed his cheek. 'You alright, baby?'

He smiled up at her. 'As ever.'

She kissed his ear and down his neck. 'What are you looking at?'

He shrugged as her lips tickled him. 'Car porn!' He pointed to the air intakes on a gaudily coloured rally car. 'Look at the pipes on that!'

She gave his shoulder a playful slap. 'Tom Lewis, you are nothing short of a vehicular pervert.' She wandered back toward the kitchen. 'Lunch won't be long.'

'Where did you go?' he called through to her.

'We went on the Castle park path by way of a change.' She took a can of soup from the cupboard. 'Is chicken soup okay?'

'Fine. Did you see anything interesting?'

She fastened the can to the opener and twisted the handle. 'No...just a couple of squirrels. Archie chased a rabbit...' She emptied the contents of the can into a pan

and switched on the stove. '...and I got myself stuck on a fence.'

She collected cutlery, a napkin and condiments, and took them through to where Tom sat.

'Laptop closed please.'

He did as instructed and she moved it from the table tray attached to frame of his wheelchair.

He squirmed in his seat.

'Numb bum?'

'Bloody leg's itching like the devil,' he said.

The plaster of Paris cast encasing his broken femur, tibia and fibula stretched from his hip to his toes and he rested it on a support attached to the chair. Although at three months into his recovery he could hobble about on crutches, he still preferred the wheelchair.

'What did you say about getting yourself stuck on a fence?' he asked.

'It was a silly thing,' she said as she arranged the cutlery and condiments neatly, flicked his napkin unfolded and tucked it into his shirtfront.

'I thought Archie was hurt. I had to go and find him and I got caught on the barbed wire.'

She turned herself around, presenting him with the sight of faded denims pulled tight over her neat backside.

'Have I made a hole in my pants?'

Tom ran his hand over her bottom and between her legs. 'Nope,' he said. 'No holes that shouldn't be there.' He slapped the material, making her cry out.

'Ow! Cheeky beggar!'

'You wait until I get this cast off. I'll show you cheeky.'

He patted his pot leg, winked at her, puckered his lips and mimed a kiss.

'Saucy sod!'

She disappeared into the kitchen, returning shortly with a steaming bowl of soup and a bread roll and placed them on the tray before him.

'Be careful,' she said, blowing seductively over the steaming soup. 'It's...hot.'

Chapter 2

Sunshine yellow waterproof jacket, belt at the waist, small decorative cape at her shoulder.

'Come on Archie, time for walkies,' Linda said, pressing her feet into her boots.

The little dog lay still in his bed, showing no signs of wanting to shift from it. Too warm and snug to give it up to go out in the wet.

Tom manoeuvred his wheelchair backwards through the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room.

'You're not going out are you? It's raining,' he said, and cursed as he scraped another gouge into the paintwork of the doorframe.

Linda peered out of the kitchen window. "Archie needs his walk, and it's stopped now. I think the sun might come out soon.'

She took the dog's lead from the hook by the door. Only Archie's eyes moved, regarding her warily, showing the whites of his eyes.

'He doesn't look too happy. You know he doesn't like to get his feet wet.'

'Then it's time he did.' She bent down, encouraging the dog from its bed. 'Come on, boy. I've got sweeties.'

She took a dog treat from her pocket.

Obeying his greed rather than his mistress's command, Archie slunk from his bed, his tail between his legs, and allowed her to clip on his lead in return for the promised 'sweetie'.

'Don't be long,' Tom said. 'You know I get lonely without you.'

'Don't be so soft.' She gave his head a brief kiss. 'Behave yourself.'

'What do you think I'm going to do stuck in this contraption?'

'Stay off the porn sites...I'll know you know.'

'Bah! Foiled again. Spoilsport.'

The kitchen door slammed, and she was gone.

The early morning rain moved on, the clouds thinned and sunshine struck through the trees, dropping shafts of light onto the path to stand in little golden discs. Drops of water clung to every leaf, blade of grass and cobweb, shook loose by the slightest breath of the clean and fresh smelling breeze.

While Archie skirted around the shallow puddles, keeping his paws dry, Linda marched along the track, stamping her Wellington boots through them like a child.

She checked her watch - two minutes to ten - and came to a halt when she reached the point in the fence where her trouble occurred the day before.

No sound in the still and misty wood, save post downpour birdsong, a sweet melodic sound a racing pulse in her ears threatened to drown out.

Archie, who had dashed ahead, turned to see why his mistress had taken to standing stock still on the path. He scurried back to join her and she threw him a treat from her pocket.

'What am I doing, Archie?' she said. 'What am I thinking of meeting a complete stranger in the woods. Could I be any stupider? I don't know this man from Adam...' She rolled her eyes at the unintended pun and sighed. 'Do you think we should go home and forget about it?'

Confounded by the question, Archie whimpered.

'Yes, I think we should err on the side of caution,' she said, making her decision. 'I'm sure he's a nice enough chap, but I don't think we should take the chance do you? I mean, for all we know, he could be a maniac axe murderer. I could vanish without a trace in these woods and they'd never find me, chopped into little pieces.'

Suddenly Archie pricked his ears forward and stared intently at a point in the trees behind her.

'That's not very nice.'

Linda squeaked with fright and wheeled around to see Adam Strachan step out from behind a group of rowan trees.

'Hell fire!' she gasped, her hand to her throat. 'You scared the living daylight out of me!'

'Sorry about that, I couldn't resist,' he said, chuckling quietly.

'You shouldn't creep up on people like that. You could have given me a heart attack.'

'It's part of the job. I've got to be able to sneak up on poachers and trespassers and catch them in the act, before I leap out and nab them.'

By now Archie was sniffing Adam's boots with great interest, and he bent down and tickled the dog's ears.

'Hello, fella. Remember me?'

His tone was light and friendly and Linda smiled at his kindness towards the little creature. Archie wagged with expectation of a treat.

'Were you waiting for me?' she said.

Adam straightened up. 'I must confess I was...with my axe all nicely sharpened.'

She felt herself redden with embarrassment. 'You weren't meant to hear...'

'Sound carries in these woods.'

'I was just talking things over with Archie.'

'And what did he have to say?'

'Not much this time.'

'You're right, by the way,' he said. 'You could easily get lost in here, even if you do stick to the paths. Another good reason for not wandering.'

'I'll remember.'

'Do you want to walk now?'

'Yes please.'

'We'll stay on the main track. I don't want to make you uneasy.'

'Fine by me,' she said, her nervousness abated. 'And I'll keep quiet so we can enjoy it.'

He looked at her as if he didn't believe she could stay quiet if she tried. An astute observation for so short an acquaintance.

The two of them set off together down the well-trodden path, Archie gambolling ahead.

The not talking lasted less than a minute.

'I like your gun,' she said. 'It's very pretty.'

Adam stroked the walnut stock of his old friend.

'Practical rather than pretty.'

'Is it loaded?'

'Of course. Wouldn't be any point in carrying an empty gun, would there?'

'I s'pose not. Can I hold it?'

'No.'

'Why?'

He emphasised slowly, to make the point. 'Because-it's-loaded.'

They took a dozen more steps in silence.

'Can't you a least show me how it works, for curiosity's sake?'

He gave in to her naive inquisitiveness.

'Aye, I suppose there'll be no harm but a wasted cartridge.'

He led her off the path and into a clearing in the trees.

'Stand here,' he said, indicating she should stay close by his side. 'And hold tight onto Archie.'

She clipped the lead onto the dog's collar and wound the free end around her wrist.

'Okay, we're ready.'

He joined the gun together with a solid metallic *click*. 'You might want to put your fingers in your ears, it's pretty loud.'

When she had done as he advised, he put the gun to his shoulder, checked nobody had strayed into the vicinity, aimed at a point somewhere above head height at the far side of the clearing, and squeezed the trigger.

The noise, even through blocked ears, made her start. Leaves and twigs splintered and scattered where the shot struck foliage. The air filled with smoke smelling strongly of gunpowder as the blast echoed around the woodland, scaring birds into squawking, panicked flight.

Archie let go a small amount of nervous urine and wound himself around her legs, trying to find somewhere to hide.

Linda whooped her excitement. 'You weren't joking – that was *loud!*'

Adam broke the gun, ejected the spent cartridge and replaced it with a fresh one from his pocket. 'And that was just one barrel,' he said, retrieving his used ammunition. 'Both together, twice the bang. Satisfied now?'

'Yes thank you.'

'What do you find to shoot?' she asked as he led her back to the main path.

'Rabbits, pheasants, quail, rats...'

She wrinkled her nose and shuddered. 'Rats...ewww! I hate rats. Nasty dirty creatures.'

He licked his lips exaggeratedly, savouring her distaste. 'But they taste great barbecued—'

'Urgh!'

'And give a rat-a-touille a real kick.'

'Stop it!'

He laughed out loud. 'You're not a vegetarian are you? '

'No, I like meat, but if you carry on talking about barbecued vermin, I'm going to start thinking about it. It'll be spider kebabs next. Can we talk about something else please?'

'I also shoot poachers...and trespassers.'

'You do not! You're not allowed. And why would you want to shoot a man for pinching a rabbit? It's not like there's a shortage. They get in my garden and play merry hell with my lettuces. Thieving little buggers.'

'It's not just rabbits; there are pheasants and deer too. Cash crops. And there's a badger sett that needs to be protected.'

'So, you're a thingy, a whatchamacallit—' She clicked her fingers. 'A gamekeeper? Like whasisname - Mellors, in that dirty book?'

Adam harrumphed and turned away, and she thought she detected a hint of red in his cheeks.

She followed close behind him as the path wound down a gentle slope and crossed a stone bridge spanning the burn which ran through The Oak Wood.

Although the majority of trees in the wood were oak, hence its name, there was also a fair sprinkling of rowan, beech and horse chestnut, all of which were beginning to show signs of life as they recovered from the winter. Once past the bridge, the wood became the park proper.

All at once, loud, eerie cries of *meeeeee-or, meeeee-or* pierced the quiet.

'What is that noise?' she asked, looking around. 'It's so peculiar and downright spooky when it comes out of the mist.'

Adam too was looking. 'Ach, it's that damned, blasted peacock.'

'A peacock? Here in these woods, really?'

'Nothing to get excited about, believe me.'

'Oh, I love peacocks,' she said. 'They are so beautiful with their great big tails all spread out. Will we see it? I do hope so.'

'This one isn't beautiful,' Adam grumbled. 'It's a bloody, noisy pest and if I ever clap my eyes on it again, it gets the next shot...and in the pot it goes.'

'You wouldn't eat it!' she exclaimed, horrified.

'Oh, wouldn't I? Under all that show off finery it's nothing more than an extra large chicken, and after all the years of torture it's given me, I can't think of a more fitting end for it than being roasted in a hot oven with half a pound of sage and onion stuffed up its parson's nose.'

Linda looked at him, wide eyed. 'Adam Strachan! You marble hearted fiend! I'm...I'm speechless.'

'Chance would be a fine thing,' he murmured.

'What?'

He smiled down on her. 'And you, my dear Ms Lewis, are a hopeless romantic. Shall we go on?'

The trees thinned out and gave way to swathes of grass dotted with dancing daffodils and cropped close by sheep. The rough path joined the tarmac road serving both Home Farm and a small cluster of cottages.

The road forked. In one direction, it led to a large, white house known locally as 'the Castle'. The other

way, it stretched out a half mile in a dead straight line, ending at large iron gates permanently open to allow access to the park. Beyond the gates lay a main road carrying traffic to the next village.

They walked the length of the road. He pointed out and named the different trees, plants, flowers and birds. She listened and learned. When they reached the gates, they did a U-turn.

'How long have you lived in the village?' Adam asked as they stepped out of the road. A car passed and he acknowledged the driver with a wave before it turned up the track toward the Home Farm.

'I moved here with Tom six years ago, but I've lived in the area since I was sixteen,' Linda said. 'My father moved us to Scotland when he retired. He preferred the fishing up here.'

'A fisherman? A man after my own heart. So, where do you hail from originally?'

'A small town in Wales called Blaenavon.'

'Ah, you're Welsh? That explains the accent.'

'Only by accident of birth. Both my parents are English. They were living and working in Wales when I was born so I was brought up and schooled there. I sort of absorbed an accent and I can't seem to get rid of it. I don't speak much of the lingo though, just enough to get by; please, thank you, cup of coffee, milk no sugar, that sort of thing. I never seem to have enough spit and it's impossible to articulate with your tongue nailed to the roof of your mouth.'

He laughed. 'That's why I could never learn Gaelic.'

'And please don't describe the way I talk as sing-song. It's so clichéd and I hate it.'

'Point taken, but it is very fetching.'

They walked a few yards in silence. When she glanced at Adam's face, she saw a small smile playing on his lips.

'Go ahead, ask me,' she said. 'Everybody does.'

'Ask you what?'

'To say it, you know you want to.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You're dying to ask me if I can say
Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlilllantysiliogogog
och.'

'Can you?'

'No.'

They filled the rest of their walk with idle small talk, Archie running back and forth the whole way, his little legs a busy blur. Eventually they all ended up back where they started and the moment of parting had come. They stood, each waiting for the other to speak.

Adam went first.

'It's been nice spending time with you, Linda. Will you be coming this way again?'

'Until the cows are gone,' she said.

'Cows?'

'We usually go down by the river, but they've put cows in the field, and I don't like cows. They scare me. I needed somewhere to walk until they were gone again.'

'I can assure you, there are definitely no cows in the woods,' said Adam.

'No, but I'm thinking there's awful lot of bull.'

Adam's peal of laughter rang around them, raucous and infectious.

'You are a breath of fresh air, Linda. A real tonic. Say you'll come and walk with me again. No bull, I promise.' He flicked his hand over his chest.

She smiled. 'I'd like that.'

'Then I will look out for you,' he said.

She checked her watch. 'Oh, good Lord, look at the time. Tom's going to wonder where I've got to.'

'Tom?'

'My husband?'

His smile faded a little at the reminder. 'Oh aye, of course. I forgot.'

'I have to go. He can't do much for himself at the moment and he'll be worried.'

She set off at a brisk pace up the path towards home, calling back over her shoulder.

'I'll see you again soon, Adam...?'

'Aye, see you.'

He waved and watched her walk away until she disappeared around a bend in the path.

'What do you think of Adam, Arch?'

The little dog balanced on his haunches in a classic begging posture, and Linda threw him a treat which he caught mid-flight.

'He's nice isn't he? He's quite handsome too, in a weather-beaten, rugged sort of way. I wonder how old he is under that tatty old hat.'

If Archie had an opinion, he was keeping it to himself.

'He has nice eyes, don't you think? Nice, but a little bit sad?' She threw another treat. 'Do you think we should see him again?'

Archie looked up at her, his long pink tongue lolling from his open mouth.

'So do I. We're only walking and talking. It can't do any harm.'

They reached her garden gate and she flicked the latch. 'Now then, Archie, not a word to Tom about Adam. He'll jump to completely the wrong conclusion and spoil everything. Okay?'

She let herself into the house and called out her greeting.

She didn't go to the wood the next day. It was raining hard and Archie steadfastly refused to get out of his bed. Tom too insisted she stay home.

'You can stay indoors for one day. It won't kill Archie to miss one walk and I don't want you getting soaked and getting a cold.'

Reluctantly, she agreed.

Unbeknownst to her, Adam Strachan had been walking the path, watching and waiting for her. He took shelter from the rain under the outreaching arms of a newly leafed oak, but when she did not appear after an hour, he gave up, and with water dripping from the peak of his cap, trudged despondently towards the relative dry of his home.

Chapter 3

The weekend passed, overcast, wet and miserable, until Monday morning dawned bright and sunny, and mid morning Archie was more than happy to hear the words; 'Do you want to go walkies?'

Linda kissed her husband goodbye.

'I'll be back in time to make your lunch. Don't get into mischief.'

She saw no sign of Adam on her walk down the Oak Wood path. She reached the tarmac road and scanned up and down its deserted length.

'He's not here,' she said to Archie. 'It looks like we've missed him. Come on, let's go back.'

She turned, intending to retrace her steps, to find Adam Strachan leaning nonchalantly against the bridge's stone parapet, his gun propped casually against one shoulder.

'Leaving so soon?' he said.

Linda surprised herself at how excited she felt to see the rugged man, and couldn't help but smile.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hello, yourself.'

'I thought you weren't here. I was going home.'

'I'm always here...somewhere.'

'I'm sorry I didn't come on Friday. It was raining. I stayed in.'

'A bit of rain never hurt anyone.'

'You weren't out in it, were you?'

'Not all day.'

Adam pushed himself away from the stonework, and pointed with his gun to a track splitting off from the main path. 'Let's take a different route today.'

He took her on a path they hadn't used before, leading her through a grove of beech trees and out onto a roadway. As they rounded a bend, the grand white

edifice of the Castle appeared in a gap between the trees.

Linda came to a standstill, admiring the view. 'It's so pretty, isn't it?' she said with a dreamy sigh.

'From a distance, to a romantic,' he huffed.

He continued up the path. She ran to catch up with him, grabbing at his arm.

'We shouldn't go any closer. It's private property.'

'And you are a great respecter of private property, aren't you?' he scoffed.

'That was just a bit of woodland, this is someone's house. She yanked his sleeve again. 'Will you STOP!'

'What's the matter now?'

'I don't want to go any nearer. We could get into trouble.'

'I don't think so.'

'Well, how would you know?'

He continued his stroll. 'I know the owner.'

She caught up with him again. 'Do you really?'

'Aye. Him and me...' He crossed his fingers. '...we're like that.'

As they neared the Castle, Linda got a better view and could see it was not in fact a true castle, but rather a large house of typical Scottish Tower design; a four storey compact building with a crenulated square turret and slated roof. A Saltire hung limply from a flagpole and deep, green ivy clad most of the walls.

'What's he like...the owner?' she asked. 'I don't even know his name?'

'Finn,' said Adam. 'I'll introduce you.'

They continued up the path. Archie alternated between running through their legs and sprinting in wide circles across an area of daisy-strewn grass that could loosely be described as lawn.

Closer to, and Linda could see the building was not in a good state of repair. The render, badly cracked and chipped, had come loose, and in places was missing altogether exposing the granite block underneath. Many of the window frames were rotten. Those that weren't were in dire need of a fresh coat of paint. Some of the

upper windows were cracked, two panes were broken, and the flag, dirty and tattered, hung like a used dishrag.

She got the impression the all encompassing ivy might be the only thing holding the building together.

When Adam led her to the rear of the building, they passed a battered, heavily mud splattered Land Rover Defender, one that had definitely seen far better days and could possibly, under the dirt, be green...or blue...she couldn't really tell. She wrinkled her nose at the sight of the filthy vehicle.

'How awful! Someone's abandoned that mucky old thing here. What a wreck.'

Adam sniffed. 'How d'you know it's not someone's pride and joy?'

'Who would admit to owning that? It's disgusting.'

She looked at him, at the car, and back to him.

'It's yours isn't it?' she said sheepishly.

He smiled and nodded.

'Bugger.'

She put her fingers to her lips and made a motion akin to fastening a zipper.

He turned the handle on a heavily studded door and it creaked open. 'After you,' he said.

She peered into the darkness beyond. 'You want me to go in there?'

'It's the way in.'

'But it's dark.'

'Don't you trust me?'

'I've known you for a grand total of six hours and...'

She looked to her timepiece. '...twenty minutes, so it's still a bit soon to tell.'

'If it will make you more comfortable, I'll leave the door open and you can run away any time you want to, but there'll be a terrible draught.'

She met his eyes, and saw no sign of threat in them. 'Okay,' she said. 'I trust you.'

'Mind the steps,' he warned.

She took two steps down into a large, gloomy room, into some kind of cellar kitchen.

'Finn!' Adam called out. 'There's someone here I'd like you to meet.'

From deep in the shadow came a sound of scrabbling and snuffling, and a large black Labrador hobbled over to greet them. He wagged his heavy black tail slowly from side to side.

Adam crouched to greet his canine friend. 'Hello there, boy.'

Linda's mouth parted in disbelief. 'Finn is a dog.'

'Erm...aye, he is.' Adam rubbed the dog's neck.

'You said the house belonged to him.'

'Aye, I did. Sorry. A slight misdirection on my part.'

'So who does own this place?'

'I have to confess...I do...did.'

He turned his attention to the dog nuzzling at his jacket pocket.

'Finn, this is Linda, say hello...and be nice.'

The dog ambled forwards and pushed its nose deep into her crotch, at which she flinched and let out a shrill squeal.

Adam grabbed Finn by the collar and pulled him away.

'Ach! I said be nice, Finn. I'm so sorry about that. That was a little too friendly. Bad dog, Finn. That was gey rude. Go back to your bed - dearie me. You okay Linda?'

'Yes. Fine. Thanks.'

He apologised again and closed the door and the room was suddenly gloomier. He flicked a switch on the wall and weak light leaked from a bare bulb attached to a wire hanging from the ceiling. It did little to light the room; it merely enhanced the shadows.

Adam removed his cap and tousled his flattened, mousy coloured hair, thick and wavy and a little too long, but also Linda could now see his face more clearly.

Age still undetermined, strong, tanned features emphasised the sharp greyness of his eyes, the fine lines around which added to his cragginess. Strong brows, pulled together in a light frown, cheeks and chin unshaven for at least two days.

He took off his coat beneath which he wore a rough cable knit sweater over a checked flannel shirt tucked into well worn corduroy trousers tied at the waist with a length of coarse rope. His clothes looked to be too big, as if he had recently lost weight.

He pushed up his sweater and shirt sleeves and light glinted at his wrist; the heavy metal bracelet of an expensive looking watch.

'Make yourself comfortable,' he said.

Linda's gaze shifted from him to the room. It didn't take her long to form the opinion that Adam Strachan and his surroundings were well matched in their shambolic rusticity.

Large pine table in the centre of the room, almost every square inch of its surface covered with newspapers and oily bits of metal. Machinery, perhaps? Six pine chairs, three with seat pads, one with a pile of...laundry? Cabinets on the floor, topped off with a length of well-worn and deeply stained wooden worktop. A rusty stove, hooked up to a large blue gas cylinder. A floor of rough-hewn black slate, dotted here and there with well-worn rag rugs. Unwashed crockery and cutlery in the chipped Belfast sink, and dominating all, a huge, stone fireplace in which a few glowing embers remained.

At one time the source of all heat, hot water and cooking facilities in the house, it took up the whole of the far wall. In front of it were two scruffy but comfortable looking, armchairs and a black dog in a basket. Against another wall, boxes, ranging in size from tea chests to shoeboxes, stacked in haphazard piles.

Adam threw up his hands. 'I'm sorry, I didn't realise the place was such a mess.' He snatched up a cushion and began to plump it. 'I suppose I've just got used to it. I don't usually have guests,' he said, dropping the cushion back into the chair and inviting her to sit. 'Take a pew.'

Linda removed coat despite the chilly dampness of the room. 'Don't worry about it,' she said. 'It's not fair to judge a bloke by the state of his kitchen. What's this?'

She picked up an open book from the seat of the other chair. 'The Little House at Allington. You like classics?'

'Aye.'

'Me too. Where's Archie?'

'Exploring.'

Finn, curled up in his bed, watched with interest as the tan and white interloper investigated his territory. Finally, Archie approached him. After a perfunctory sniff, Finn allowed him to climb into the bed beside him and the two dogs turned their faces to their respective owners, who observed them with amusement.

'Well, they at least seem to be quite at ease,' said Adam. 'I have coffee...is that okay?'

Linda nodded. 'Lovely, thank you.'

He took the kettle to the tap, filled it with water and plugged it into a dubious looking socket on the wall, flicking the switch on its handle. He plucked two mugs from the collection of dirty crockery in the sink, rinsed them under the tap and dried them on a grubby tea towel.

As he waited for the kettle to boil, he inspected the remains of the fire, prodding at the ashes with a poker. 'It's not dead yet. I think I can revive this.'

He screwed up a sheet of newspaper and broke some kindling, and carefully piled them atop the embers. He cupped his hands over them, and blew lightly. Tendrils of smoke began to curl between his fingers. He puffed at it a few more times, until a red glow appeared on the paper. Suddenly, it burst into flames. He quickly added more kindling, and deftly arranged assorted pieces of wood around and over it. They began to smoulder and catch light, and as the flames grew and took hold, he stood back, satisfied. 'That should be okay for a while.'

'Well done,' said Linda, suitably impressed.

The kettle whistled and he made coffee for them both. He handed Linda a steaming mug, during which she observed the state of his fingernails - clean and neatly trimmed.

He settled into the other armchair with a wearisome sigh.

This is indeed a man of interesting contradictions, she thought. His hands are rough and calloused, like tree bark, but he keeps his nails nice and tidy; big and brusque in appearance, yet gentle natured and soft spoken and liked classical literature. He gave the general impression of being rugged and unkempt, although when he smiled he showed a set of white, even, well cared for teeth, and despite his clothes being rough and well-worn, almost into holes in some places, his wrist carried a very expensive-looking watch.

'There's no need to be nervous,' he said, catching a glimpse of her watching him over the rim of her mug. 'I'm harmless enough.'

'I'm sure you are. And don't you get any wrong ideas about me, either. I don't usually go into strange men's kitchens.'

'So why did you come here?'

'I don't really know.'

An honest answer. The truth of the matter was, she didn't know. She saw something in this man's face when she first looked in his eyes, heard it in the timbre of his voice. She knew from the first instant of their meeting that she could trust him.

'Do you really live here, or are you just trying to impress me with your own trespassing skills?' she said.

He chuckled quietly. 'If I was a trespasser, how would I know where the coffee was kept?'

'Lucky guess. Who else lives here?'

'No-one.'

'There's just you in this whole place? You have it all to yourself?'

'In theory. I live down here and I have all this...' He swept his hand in a wide arc. 'And a bedroom and bathroom through there.' He indicated a door set in the wall in the corner of the room.

'What about the rest of the house? It's so huge.'

'It's empty. It has been for a couple of years. It's been bought by a private concern. They're going to turn it into a hotel and conference centre. Conversion is supposed to start in the summer. At the moment,

unfortunately, it's all but uninhabitable...even down here's just about tolerable. At least the rats have moved out.'

'Again with the rats...' She shuddered and sipped at her coffee. 'I take it you'll be moving out before the work starts?'

'Aye. The new owners don't want a sitting tenant getting in the way. I've been given leave to stay 'til then.'

'Where will you go?'

'I bought a derelict cottage on the estate and I've been doing it up for the last few months.' He gave a small, ironic laugh. 'Rich isn't it? I've sold the estate to a bunch of developers and then bought a cottage I already owned back from them. And I had to do it up myself.'

'I know some people...builders, joiners...if you want any help...'

'Thanks. I'll manage.'

They sat in silence, watching the fire and drinking their coffee.

'How long have you lived here...at the Castle?' she asked.

'Is that what you call it too?'

'It's a local nickname.'

Adam rested his head on the back of his chair. 'All my life,' he said. 'I was born in the bedroom in the turret. You can just see the window peeping through the ivy.'

'And is there no-one can help you stay here and do it up. Can't you get some kind of government grant?'

He shook his head. 'No. It's already sold. I have two brothers and a sister, but they're not interested in a money pit like this, and there is no conservation money available. Cutbacks.'

'A crying shame.'

'Tell me about it.'

A cast of such painful sadness crossed his face, she felt genuinely, deeply sorry for him.

'Drink your coffee, and I'll give you the grand tour,' he said with false cheeriness. 'I'll root out a couple of hard hats.'

'It's not that bad, surely.'

He looked at the ceiling, as if expecting it to collapse in on him at any moment. 'I'm afraid it is.'

As they worked their way from floor to floor, room to room of the Castle, all Linda's romantic illusions were shattered.

If viewed from a distance the building retained an impression of external grandeur. Close to, stark reality bit hard. Inside was in a state of hollow dilapidation, verging on dereliction.

Without exception, all the rooms had been stripped bare. In some even the floorboards were missing, and in others the ceiling joists were exposed. Damp wallpaper peeled from the walls, dragging chunks of plaster off with it and the bathrooms had been divested of their fittings. Any windows not cracked or broken and letting in a draught were opaque with cobwebs, dust and grime.

As Adam showed Linda around, their footsteps and voices echoed in the high ceilinged emptiness and her feeling of empty despair grew.

'Structurally, it's pretty sound and the roof's in fairly good condition so it hasn't rained in too much,' he said, finding the one and only good point. 'The new owners plan to gut it completely, although as you can see, time and neglect have given them a head start.'

'A grand place like this must have been crammed with antiques, pictures and paintings, furniture and the like,' said Linda, picking her way to the centre of the former dining room.

'It was, and they were the first to go. The proceeds were divided between the estate's creditors, the taxman and my siblings.'

Linda ran her hand over a richly carved stone mantle, her expression one of helpless dismay.

'This is just so wrong...' she said, deeply moved, not only by the house's state of disrepair, but the effect it was having on its ex-owner. 'A place like this should be treasured, not left to rack and ruin. It's just... heartbreaking.'

'I did my best, but like a runaway train, it got out of control, hit the buffers, and crashed right through. There was nothing else I could do but let it go.'

'It's not your fault. It's the way things are today. People don't seem to have the...the soul to love old buildings any more. They would rather waste money on another pointless golf course, or converting old railway lines into cycle tracks that nobody will use. The irony is, restoring a beautiful place like this would probably cost less in the long run.'

'Aye. It always comes down to money, or in my case, the lack of it.'

They returned to the ground floor, to a door hidden away under the main staircase.

'Servants' route,' he said, opening it for her.

'You had servants?'

'A few.'

After carefully picking their way down a short flight of steps, they were back in cellar kitchen and he pulled closed a small, almost invisible door to the left of the range.

Linda declared it time for her to take her leave of him.

'I'll walk you back to the gate,' he said, ushering her through the outer door.

They walked in relative silence the half mile down the driveway to the wrought iron gates.

'Thanks for the coffee...and the tour,' she said when they came to the end of the road.

'You're welcome. I'm sorry it wasn't more pleasant.'

'It was an education. Would you mind if I came to see you again?'

'Of course, if my decrepitude hasn't put you off.'

'Not at all. I'd very much like to. You look like a man who might appreciate some company.'

'That I would. But what will your husband say?'

'Tom doesn't have to know. My friends are my friends and none of his business.'

'Am I your friend?'

'I hope you will be.'

He smiled and it touched his eyes. 'I hope so too, Linda. Will I see you tomorrow?'

'No, not tomorrow. I have to go with Tom to the hospital for a check-up.' She screwed up her eyes as she worked out her schedule. 'The day after is Wednesday, that's pencilled in as shopping day, and I want to spend the weekend with Tom, so...that leaves just Thursday morning, should you happen to be out in the woods, looking for poachers...or trespassers.'

He smiled. 'Thursday it is then. It's a date.'

They made their goodbyes, and he watched after her as she departed the park through the gates, giving him a small wave as she turned left and disappeared behind the wall to return home via the main road.

He trudged back up the driveway to his dark, unwelcoming rooms.

Chapter 4

The outpatient appointment didn't give them encouraging news. Although his femur and fibula had healed well, the X-rays showed the tibia in Tom's lower leg had, for some reason, not knit together as expected and the fracture remained unstable. The Orthopaedic surgeon suggested some surgical intervention might be necessary to help speed along recovery.

'We can put screws into the bone to stabilise it,' he said. 'You'll have to come in for a day or two, maybe up to a week. I know it seems like a step backwards, Tom, but it will help in the long run.'

Tom sighed. 'I can't take any steps at all at the moment, Doc, let alone run. I suppose I'll have a fair old scar?'

'I'm afraid so. From here...'

Starting at Tom's left knee, the doctor traced a straight line seven inches long, down the front of the cast. '...to here.'

Tom looked thoroughly downcast as he accepted his fate. 'Do what you have to do,' he said. 'As long as I can get back on my feet, back to work...and back to some sort of normal life.'

'I can show you exactly what I'm going to do.'

The surgeon pulled a folder of photographs from the wall shelf behind him, and showed it to his patient, going into exquisite detail about the procedure. The colour drained from Tom's face when he saw what the man intended to do to his leg.

The appointment over, he and Linda retired to the cafeteria. She stirred her coffee and looked across the table to her husband, staring glumly into his cup.

'Are you alright, sweetheart? You still look a little peaky.'

'Those photos freaked me out a bit,' he said, a slight shake to his voice. 'All that cutting and screwing...' He

pressed his eyes shut and put his hand over his mouth and for a moment, she thought he might be sick.

'It'll be alright, darling,' she said. 'It's for the best and I'll look after you, you know that.'

He reached out a trembling hand and she held it tightly.

'I know you will, babe,' he said. 'I'm sorry everything's gone wrong. I'm such a letdown; I can't even heal a bone properly.'

'It's not your fault.' She kissed his fingers. 'Shit happens.'

His grip on her hand suddenly tightened, and his deep brown eyes grew moist. 'What...what if it doesn't work, Lind? What if it all goes wrong and they have to...have to...?' He dropped his chin to his chest.

'Have to what, sweetie?'

He shook his head, not wanting the words to pass his lips, in case speaking them made them come true.

'Have to take your leg off?'

His worst fear voiced for him. He nodded, blinking hard.

She left her seat and embraced him. 'It's not going to come to that, my love. It won't. I promise you on my heart I won't let them do that to you.'

They held each other tightly, oblivious to the onlookers at the other tables.

'Do you want to go home now, sweetie?' she said, gently stroking his hair.

He nodded. 'Please, Lind. Get me out of this place.'

That night they lay together in bed, her head on his chest and her arm draped across him, his plaster leg aching and uncomfortable and keeping him awake. He couldn't scratch the interminable itch from inside the cast, nor could he turn over and make himself more comfortable.

The graphic pictures from the doctor's office kept flashing through his mind, and his thoughts dwelled on sharp knives and long metal screws and him, a limbless cripple forever on crutches, drawing invalidity benefit, a

burden on his wife and society. He lay on his back, thoroughly miserable, as Linda slept soundly at his side.

Uncharacteristically quiet over breakfast, looking pale and tired, Tom picked at only a token mouthful of cereal. The rest he poked and prodded with his spoon, moving it around the dish.

Linda looked on with concern. 'What's wrong, babe?'

'Nothing.'

'Did you not sleep?'

'Not really.'

'Worried about what the doctor said?'

He dropped his spoon into his dish with a clatter, and rubbed his brow. 'Of course I'm worried. Jesus Christ, Lind, you didn't see what he's going to do to me. A cut a mile long, screws and pins like a frigging Meccano set. And if it doesn't work, and there's nothing else they can do, I could lose my leg. If that happens I'll be a cripple for the rest of my life and won't be any use to anybody ever again. So yes, I'm worried, in fact, to put not too fine a point on it, I'm fucking frantic!'

He looked into her eyes, filled with compassion and love for him, and was immediately sorry for his outburst.

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't take it out on you.'

He reached for her hand and clung to it.

'I understand you're scared,' she said, tenderly. 'But it's not going to be anywhere near as bad as you think. Lots of people have this kind of surgery every day. They know what they're doing. It will be a bit uncomfortable for a while, but you will get better. I give you my solemn word. No-one is going to take your leg.'

She stood behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck, nuzzling into it and kissing it. 'I promise you.'

He stroked her arms as she hugged them across his chest. 'It's not a promise you can make, babe. How can you stop them?'

'Sweetheart, if they want to do anything to you, they'll have to go through me first, and you know how stubborn I can be when I put my mind to it.'

'Like a reinforced stone wall.'

'Exactly.' She kissed his ear. 'Now, please eat something, and then I'll help you get dressed.'

Tom's shoulders slumped and he let out a pitiful moan. 'Look at me, Lind. I'm useless enough now. I can't even get dressed by myself. If they make me a cripple, I'll be completely fucking hopeless. You'll be better off without me.'

She pressed her hands firmly on his shoulders. 'Thomas Stephen Lewis you stop talking like that right now! This operation is going to fix you once and for all. You'll be up and about and better in a couple of months, that's no time at all.'

'But what if...?'

'No! No what ifs. I don't want to hear any more. I am ordering you to stop feeling sorry for yourself and eat your breakfast.'

'Yes ma'am,' he said, saluting. He sighed. 'You're probably right, you usually are, and I'm getting all het up over nothing.'

She briefly kissed his head. 'Yes you are.' She indicated the cereal, going soggy in the dish of milk. 'Tuck in before it spoils. You need to keep up your strength. You've a lot of work ahead of you.'

He gave her a sideways glance, and then turned his eyes on her, his expression exaggerated into one of a helpless puppy - something he did whenever he played for her sympathy.

'Feed me then,' he said with a pout.

Linda, as always, went along with his silly, childish game. 'You are such a big baby,' she said, picked up the spoon and loaded it with cereal. 'Open wide.'

He did. She stuffed the spoon unceremoniously into his mouth.

Tom had perfected a system of getting upstairs. Slow and steady, but it worked. A backward sitting shuffle, one stair at a time, with Linda taking the weight of the heavy and cumbersome plaster leg. Even with her help, it was hard work and his arms ached.

Once upstairs in the cramped cottage, he had no room to move around with his crutches. All he could do was sit on the bed and allow her to take over his care.

His recovery had been slow. Week by week, he improved, but she still had to do everything for him. Sometimes, he secretly enjoyed her compliant servitude, particularly when she took her time giving him a sponge bath, yet, as much as he took pleasure in her washing and dressing him, he'd lately begun to have the feeling he was becoming a burden. She never complained, always handling him with the utmost gentleness and consideration, but he knew even her saint-like patience would have its limit.

She helped him to wash and shave, pulled a t-shirt over his head and dressed him in a loose pair of tracksuit bottoms, adapted to fit around his cast. Ever practical, she had cut one leg from the garment and opened the side seam, and once around him, she fastened it securely with safety pins. It wasn't pretty, but it was functional.

Tom had little to say as Linda combed his rebellious wavy hair, and in the pensive quiet, her mind wandered. A small smile played on her lips as she recalled her meetings with the charismatic stranger in the Oak Wood.

Tom's sudden grabbing her around the waist brought her out of her daydream. 'I've never had an operation before,' he said.

She stopped combing his hair. 'What, babe?'

'I've never had an operation before, not a proper one. I've been reading...on the internet, about anaes...theticals...'

'Anaesthetics?'

'Yes them. I've been reading about them on the internet. They're dangerous, Lind. They inject you full of stuff, and then they give you gas and off you go to sleep. I've read that some folks never wake up again. What if that happens to me?'

She ran her fingers through his hair, smoothing it down. 'You can't believe every horror story you read on

the internet. Anaesthesia today is very safe. You'll be fine.'

He rested his head at her breast. 'But what if I don't wake up, Lind? What if I just drift off into blackness and keep on going and never see you again?'

She could feel him trembling against her. 'That's not going to happen—'

'I can't do it, I can't. I can't have the operation...' His voice trailed off and he held onto her as if his life depended on it. 'I'm too scared, Lind...I don't want to die. I don't want to leave you.'

On this occasion, he wasn't playing her for sympathy. His fear was very real, verging on terror.

'You're not going to die, my sweet,' she assured him. 'You'll be asleep for an hour or so at the most and then you'll wake up in a nice clean bed...and I'll be there waiting for you. I give you my word.' She pressed her lips to his hair. 'I'll be with you all the time. You have nothing to worry about. You'll be fine. I promise.'

Chapter 5

A family of mallard ducks dabbled in the water of the slow flowing burn beneath the bridge where Adam and Linda stood.

'Will I see you tomorrow?' he asked.

'No, not tomorrow,' she said. 'Not for a while in fact. Tom's going into hospital for his operation tomorrow morning, and I'll be going with him. He's very frightened and with good cause.'

She told him about the surgery Tom would be undergoing, and about his fear of dying under the anaesthetic.

'I think I've managed to convince him everything will be okay,' she said. 'But he's not taking it very well. I really need to be with him. It might be a week or two before I can come this way again.'

'I understand. And I hope everything goes well.'

'Thank you, Adam, for your kind thoughts. It means a lot.'

'What I meant to say was, I hope it goes well for *you*.'

'If Tom's okay, I'll be okay.'

'And if he's not?'

'Then...I'll deal with it the best way I can.'

'Linda by name, Linda by nature,' he said, smiling.

She looked at him, questioningly.

'Linda...' he said. 'In Spanish it means, er...pretty, lovely.'

'I didn't know that.' She sat herself on the low stone parapet of the bridge.

'If you need anything, if I can help at all, you can call me,' he said.

'That's very generous, but I couldn't possibly impose on you. You've only known me three weeks, and I'm not going to unload my problems onto a virtual stranger.'

A fleeting look of dejection crossed his face. 'Of course, forgive me. I'm interfering.'

The look did not go unnoticed. 'I didn't mean it like that, Adam.' She laid a hand on his arm. 'I'm sorry. You're not a stranger, not any more and I appreciate your offer, I really do.'

He nodded with sad understanding. 'It's okay.'

'Besides, there's another perfectly good reason why I can't ask you.'

'What's that?'

'I don't have a number to call you on.'

'Oh.' He fished about in the numerous pockets of his coat and pulled out a till receipt from the newsagents, and a stub of pencil. He licked the pencil's tip.

'Here,' he said, and scribbled down two numbers, one for a landline, the other for a mobile phone. He gave her the paper, and then immediately took it back to scratch through one.

'Sorry, that's the Castle number; it's been disconnected. I can't remember the cottage one offhand.'

She looked at the remaining number. 'You have a mobile phone?'

'I'm not a complete Luddite, you know. It's handy if I'm out in the woods, should I happen to break a leg or something...' He tapped his forehead with his fingers. 'I'm sorry, that was a bad example. I didn't think.'

She folded the paper neatly and carefully, and pushed it into her jeans pocket. 'It's okay, and thank you, Adam.' She hopped down off the wall. 'And now I have to go.'

'So, I'll see you...when I see you, then?' he said.

'As soon as I can, I promise. Take care, Adam.'

'Aye, you too. Cheerio.'

'Bye bye.'

He stood watching her back as she strolled away up the path toward her home, Archie, as ever, at her heels.

At the bend, she paused, turned and waved, but he had already gone.

Tom's admission to hospital next day was fraught with anxiety. His fear made him aggressive, argumentative

and unco-operative. For the simple task of having his cast removed he had to be sedated, not only for his own wellbeing, but also for the safety of the medical staff tending to him.

Linda stayed with him every moment, continually on hand to soothe and comfort him until the time came for him to be taken to theatre.

In the ante room she held one of his hands tightly and made him talk to her, to distract him as the anaesthetist injected liquids through a cannula in the back of the other. Thankfully, the fight against the mask placed over his face was short lived. Within seconds the gas began to take effect and he relaxed, his eyes rolled, and to the audible relief of everyone concerned, he fell into the arms of Morpheus.

His panic over dying under the anaesthetic proved to be unfounded, and he was returned to the ward, safe and well and deeply asleep, just over two hours later.

He blinked hard as he tried to focus.

Linda brushed his hair from his forehead, and laid her lips delicately against his brow. 'Hey sweetie, welcome back.'

Drowsy from the remnants of the anaesthetic, he managed a small smile at her through his oxygen mask before drifting back into oblivion.

A nurse appeared at the bottom of the bed and checked his chart and his level of consciousness.

'He's been awake,' whispered Linda. 'Just for a moment.'

The nurse nodded and smiled as she scribbled something on the chart, before leaving them alone behind the privacy curtains.

It would be another two hours before Tom woke sufficiently to appreciate his surroundings.

The nurse returned to take his temperature, pulse and blood pressure, and satisfied with what they told her, she removed his oxygen mask. He lifted his head from his pillow, only to see a mountain of bed coverings.

'What's that?' he said groggily, indicating the odd shape on the bed, before falling back into the pillows.

'It's just a frame; it keeps the weight of the bedclothes off your leg. Everything's okay. The operation went well. The surgeon is very pleased.'

'My leg? Singular? Did they—?'

'No, you still have two. And two sets of stinky feet.'

Tom moaned his relief. 'Thank God. Why can't I feel anything?'

'You've had a lot of pain relief, sweetie. You'll feel it soon enough.'

A tear ran from the corner of his eye and she brushed it away.

'Go back to sleep, baby. Everything's fine. You sleep. I'll be here when you wake up.'

'Promise.'

'I promise.'

Tom woke some time later, almost fully alert, and asked for a drink of water.

Linda held the beaker to his lips. 'Sip it slowly or you'll be sick. Are you in any pain?'

His thirst satisfied, he lay back against his pillows. 'Not much.'

The pallor of his face and the creasing of his brow told the truth.

'Liar.' She wiped his mouth. 'Don't try the brave soldier act with me, matey, you know it doesn't work. I'll get the nurse to give you something.' She left his bedside, returning a few moments later. 'The nurse will be along in a minute.'

She pulled her chair close enough to be able to rest her head next to his on the pillow.

He kissed her forehead. 'Have you been here all day? It is still day isn't it?'

'Early evening; nearly seven o'clock. You've been asleep all afternoon.'

'You don't need to stay. I'm still a bit dopey and not good company right now. I won't miss you too much if you go.'

'Of course you will, and you know it.'

'You can go if you want to.'

'I don't want to.' She kissed his fingers and held his palm against her cheek. 'I'll stay until the visiting bell throws me out, and I'll come back just as soon as I can tomorrow.'

She visited Tom at every opportunity, staying with him for as long as was allowed. For four days, Archie went unwalked, and Adam, unseen.

Chapter 6

Linda threw the holdall onto the passenger seat of the Volvo, settled herself into the driver's seat and turned the ignition key. A dull *tick*, and nothing more. The engine did not turn over. She tried it once more. Again a *click*. None of the dashboard lights showed the slightest glimmer of life. The battery was completely dead.

Anger welled in her and she punched the steering wheel with her fist. 'Shit! SHIT!'

She ran back into the house, rifled through the telephone directory, and made several fruitless calls.

The number for Tom's hospital ward sat on a pad by the telephone. It was her last resort, she would have to ring them and ask them to give him the bad news - she would not be visiting him that afternoon. She picked up the receiver and dialled.

'Ward twenty six, Orthopaedics. Staff Nurse Holland speaking.'

At the sound of the nurse's voice, a radical idea occurred to her.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I misdialled. I'm sorry to have bothered you.'

She hung up and went in search of her purse. From it she pulled a neatly folded piece of paper and dialled the mobile number carefully. Four rings later she heard:

'Hello?'

'Hello, is that Adam?'

'Aye.'

'Adam...it's me, Linda.'

'Linda? Just a minute.'

Muffled crackles and traffic noise came through the receiver, until he came back to her.

'I'm sorry about that. I'm in the car. I had to find somewhere to stop. What can I do for you?'

'I hate to bother you, Adam, but...do you remember when you gave me your number and you said if I needed any help, to ask you?'

'I do.'

'Well, I'm asking. No, pleading.'

'What's happened? Is it Tom...he's not...?'

The significance of his question hit her. 'Oh no, no, nothing that drastic, he's alright. You're going to think it's a minor thing really, but I've run out of options and I don't know who else to ask.'

'Go on.'

'I'm supposed to visit Tom at the hospital this afternoon, but the car's dead...the battery's flat. I've rung round but there are no taxis available...there's no bus to get me there in time, and I can't leave him alone in hospital...he'll be so upset...' She was dismayed to find herself gabbling and perilously close to tears.

Adam, hearing the distress in her voice, hushed her. 'It's okay, don't worry, I'll take you. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll be round to pick you up.'

She heaved a deep sigh of relief. 'Would you? Oh, thank you, Adam. Thank you so much.'

'It's not a problem. Where are you again?'

'Station Brae; number nine. Keep on to the very end. It's the house with the white fence.'

'I know where that is. I'll see you soon.'

Just as the promised fifteen minutes elapsed, Adam Strachan's black BMW X5 drew up outside the front gate of Linda's cottage.

He saw her at the window waiting for him, and gave a little wave. She acknowledged him and disappeared from view, reappearing moments later to lock the front door and dash as best she could up the garden path, weighed down by a large holdall. She climbed into the vehicle and stuffed the bag into the footwell and was still fastening her seatbelt as Adam drew away.

'I was expecting the Land Rover,' she said, looking over the car's interior. 'This is very nice.'

'I keep this one for best. It's the only luxury I afford myself.'

'Why didn't I see it before?'

'I keep it in the garage at the back of the Castle. It's less likely to get stolen from there.'

She settled back into the leather seat. 'Thanks for this, Adam. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.'

'It's not a problem. I'm always happy to help a damsel in distress.'

He turned left onto the main road, and once out of the village limits, their speed increased.

Linda scrutinised her companion, clean shaven, hair neatly combed, and smartly dressed in a green shirt and tie, grey trousers and casual jacket. For once, he did not have on his cap.

'You look like you'd got dressed up for something,' she said. 'Were you on your way out somewhere? I hope I haven't spoiled anything?'

'Such as?'

'A date perhaps?' She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

'In the middle of the afternoon?' He snorted. 'I should be so lucky. I was on my way back home from seeing my solicitor. What are you smiling at?'

'I've never seen you look so tidy,' she said. 'I'm used to seeing you altogether a little more, let's say, rough and ready.'

He laughed. 'Do I still scrub up well then?'

'Yes,' she said, with approval. 'Very well indeed.'

The trip to the hospital took almost forty-five minutes, and light conversation aided its passing. Adam dropped her off at the main entrance.

'You go in and see Tom. I'll wait for you in the cafeteria. When you're done, come and find me.'

'Won't you come up with me? He'd love to meet you and thank you for your trouble.'

He shook his head. 'I don't think that would be a good idea. He wants to see you, not your chauffeur. I'll wait.'

Before she could argue further, he drove off towards the car park.

Tom was sitting in the chair beside his bed, his leg supported on a pillow on a footstool. He looked cheerful, smiling broadly at her approach.

'Hello, darling,' she said, returning his smile. 'Sorry I'm a bit late. You look better. How are you feeling?' She touched his lips with hers, and his responding kiss was deep and sensual, much to the approval of the man in the bed opposite.

'I'm good,' he said. 'All the better for seeing you. You didn't speed to get here did you?'

'No, the ride was very careful and comfortable.'

'Ride...not drive?'

She pulled up a spare chair, took off her coat and made herself comfortable. 'No. The car wouldn't start. Someone from the village very generously gave me a lift.'

'Where is she?'

'Erm...visiting someone on the next floor,' she lied.

Tom kissed her hands. 'Guess what. I've been up and about today.'

'Already?'

'They're not wasting any time. I had some Physio to get my knee mobile again.'

'How did it go?'

'Brilliant. It's a bit stiff, but no trouble at all. I had another X-ray too.' He threw back the blanket covering his legs and patted his thigh, pale and thin from its long encasement in plaster. 'This baby is fine. It's almost completely healed. I've just got this little support on the lower leg now, a back slab I think they call it. My wound is clean and tidy and the doc says I can come home in a couple of days. How about that? I'm going to need to have Physio at the health centre three times a week, but it means I can come home...in once piece.'

Linda reached over and hugged him. 'I told you it would all come right.'

'And you were right, as usual.' He kissed her neck. 'I can't tell you the relief. Everything's going to be okay. I'm going to get better. In another couple of months or so I can start to think about getting back to work.'

'Don't rush it, babe. There's plenty of time. If needs be, I'll get a job to tide us over.'

'No you won't. I've told you a million times before, my wife won't work.'

'She will if she has to, and you will just have to put up with it, won't you, you chauvinist pig?'

'My God, you're sexy when you're being a bossy witch.' He pressed his forehead to hers, and grinned. 'How can I help but love you?'

'And I love you, Tom Lewis. Don't you ever forget it.'

The truth. She loved her husband with every fibre of her being, her devotion to him unshakeable. Whatever might have happened to him, even if it had resulted in him losing his leg, she would still love him. They were a couple joined not only by marriage, but also by their souls.

However, against her will, something else stirred deep within her, a growing affection for another, for the man waiting for her downstairs in the cafeteria. For Adam Strachan.

'Are you okay?' Tom said, noting her distraction.

She gave him a reassuring smile and squeezed his hand.

'I'm fine. Just a little tired. I can't sleep without you in my bed.'

They chatted about his hospital routine; he complained about the food and lack of television. She unpacked his clean clothes, magazines and treats from the holdall as she relayed her news, ensuring she made no reference to Adam. Time passed quickly until a bell rang, signalling the end of visiting.

'Where's your friend?' Tom asked, as Linda put on her coat.

'I said we'd meet in the café,' she said, and found herself relieved he did not ask who it was; she would

have struggled to come up with the name of someone he didn't already know.

'Will you be able to come tomorrow?'

'Yes, of course. It's just a flat battery. I put it on charge before I set off.'

'You did that? All by yourself?'

'Of course.'

'Clever girlie.'

'Hey, patronising swine. I'm not completely helpless you know.' She took his face in her hands and gave him a deep kiss. 'See you tomorrow, darling.' A couple more pecks on the lips, a goodbye wave and she vanished from his view.

'Very nice,' said the man in the bed opposite. 'Nice arse.'

Tom grinned at him. 'Isn't it just, and it's all mine. Get your own.'

The two men laughed at their shared sexist humour.

Adam was, as promised, waiting for her in the cafeteria. He had a newspaper open on the table in front of him while he sipped from a mug of frothy coffee. She sat at the table with him.

'How is he?' he said.

'He's doing well. He's had Physio and he's a lot more cheerful.'

'That's good. You look a lot happier too. Have you got time for a coffee before we go?'

'Yes, I think I do.'

She looked around, familiarising herself with the service. A few moments later, she re-took her seat at the table, a mug of freshly brewed coffee in her hand.

'It was really good of you to do this, Adam. Tom would have been so dreadfully upset if I couldn't visit.' She dropped a tablet of Splenda into the mug and stirred it until it dissolved. 'Under all his bluff and bluster, he's really a big softie,' she said. 'He can get a bit emotional, aggressive, particularly when he's faced with something he doesn't understand.'

'You love him very much, don't you?'

'Of course I do, he's my husband.'

'And as such, I hope he considers himself a very lucky man indeed.'

He gave her a gentle smile, warm and friendly. His eyes, however, told her a different story.

Adam brought the car to a halt at Linda's front garden gate. He set the brake; she undid her seat belt.

'Do you want to come in for a minute?' she said. 'You must be tired after all that driving and waiting about.'

'I don't think that would be a good idea.'

'Just for a while, please. I don't like it when the house is empty. I'll make you something to eat.'

He rubbed his stomach. 'Well, I have missed my tea and I am a wee bit peckish. Ach, you've twisted my arm. Lead on.'

She made sandwiches and tea for them both, which they ate at the kitchen table. Their meal done, they sat on the sofa. Archie curled up on Adam's lap, and he stroked the dog's head as it napped on him.

'Can I offer you a drink?' she asked.

'I'm driving remember.'

'I know. Just a little taste can't do any harm, can it?'

'Go on then, just a wee dram.'

She poured a small measure into a cut crystal glass and handed it to him, taking one for herself.

He sniffed the amber liquid and tasted it. 'Very nice. What is it?'

She read the label on the bottle. 'La...fro...aig.'

He laughed at her phonetic pronunciation.

'Laphroaigh. It's pronounced la-froy-gh.'

She examined the label carefully. 'Hmm! If you say so.' She put the bottle back into a cupboard and pulled out another. 'What about this one?'

He read the label and pronounced the words 'Poit Dhubh' as *potch ghoo*.

'Is it Gaelic?'

'Aye.'

She pursed her lips. 'What a strange language.'

He cleared his throat. 'Ahem...Welsh?'

She groaned and smiled. 'Touché.'

She returned the bottle to the cupboard and dropped down onto the sofa beside him, leaning her head against its well-padded back.

'You never did say what happened to Tom,' he said. 'How did he manage to break his leg so badly?'

'He was on a building job, fitting windows. The scaffolding gave way and he fell. It wasn't high, only first floor, but he landed awkwardly.'

Adam sucked air through his teeth. 'Ouch.'

'He's been in a lot of pain, but he's healed quickly, except for his shinbone...his tibia. For some reason, it's not mending properly. He's had to have it fixed with bits and bobs of metal. It's going to be another couple of months before he's fully better.' She sipped at her whisky. 'He was so frightened, poor baby. He thought they might open him up, decide he wasn't going to get any better and take his leg off. He's been frantic with worry.'

'And so have you?'

'Was it that obvious? I tried not to let it show. I didn't want to upset him any more.'

'Like I said, he's a lucky man to have someone like you.' He filled his mouth with the whisky, held it for a moment, and then swallowed it, appreciating the heat in his throat. 'He'll be in line for compensation for an accident like that, won't he?' he said.

Linda shook her head. 'No. He's come to an agreement with the company. They will keep him on full pay plus ten percent until he's better. That way they don't ruin their safety record, their insurance premiums don't go up and we keep a steady income.'

Adam huffed. 'It sounds like it's a win-win situation all round there - for the company.'

'Maybe, but it's the best option.'

'For them, not you.'

Linda contemplated the liquid in her glass for a moment. 'Tom will be coming home soon,' she said. 'I'm going to be busy looking after him so I might not be

able to go for my walk every day and I might not get to see you.'

Adam turned his empty glass around in his hand. 'Do you want to see me?'

She could not lie to him. 'Yes I do.'

'And will you tell Tom about our secret trysts in the woods and drinking coffee in my kitchen?'

'No, he doesn't need to know.' She smiled coyly. 'Trysts in the Oak Wood; it sounds so romantic.'

'That's because you *are* a romantic. I told you that already.'

'Maybe I am. Nothing wrong with that is there?'

'Nothing whatsoever. So will you have time to be romantic at least once more before he comes home?' he said, hopefully.

'I think so. I'm free all tomorrow morning if you are. How does ten o'clock suit?'

'Perfect.'

He leaned over, and to her surprise kissed her cheek. 'I look forward to it.' He handed her the empty glass and eased Archie from his lap. 'Now I really have to go.'

She let him out, and he waited by the door until he heard her lock herself securely inside. She watched from the window as the red tail lights of his vehicle disappeared from view.

Chapter 7

At the appointed time the next morning, the friends met on the bridge and walked the road through the park to the gatehouse. Archie scurried back and forth, his nose to the ground.

A loud screech pierced the air above them. Adam shaded his eyes with his hand and searched the sky, directing Linda's attention upward.

'Look, there.' He pointed at a bird with an unusually shaped tail.

'What is it?' she asked.

'A red kite. Beautiful isn't it? They're quite rare too. They were once almost wiped out, but they're making a slow comeback.'

Linda continued forward, her eyes on the acrobatic bird above and not where her feet were going. Suddenly she lurched and stumbled, her legs entangled around her busy dog. Adam grabbed her by the arm, slowing her descent onto the tarmac, but could not fully prevent her hitting her knee on the road surface.

'Are you alright?' he asked, hand cupping her elbow and assisting her back to her feet.

She brushed at the knee of her jeans. 'It's just a scrape, no damage done I don't think.'

Adam bent down to see for himself. 'A little mark. No hole. You'll live.'

'It might have been worse if you hadn't grabbed me. Full on road rash probably. Thank you.'

'Not a problem.'

As they continued their walk, her hand strayed towards his, brushing against it. She took a hold of one of his fingers, and when he did not withdraw, put her whole hand in his. He closed his fingers around hers and gave them the lightest squeeze before transferring their entwined hands into the deep pocket of his coat. They

strolled on, thus joined, until they reached the rear door of the Castle.

She relaxed her head against the back of the chair, her eyes scanning the ceiling. They came to rest on a large cobweb strung between the beams, compelling her to search for its occupant.

'I forgot to tell you, I had a telephone call before I came out this morning,' she said. 'Tom is being discharged tomorrow.'

Adam handed her a mug of coffee and took the seat beside her. 'You must be relieved.'

'You have no idea. I'll be so glad to get him home. Then I'll know for sure he's getting better. The poor baby's suffered such a lot. Being out of commission has made him really irritable and moody. I've missed the old Tom. I don't much like this miserable one.'

'What's he like? On a normal day?'

'I don't think the words Tom and normal really belong together in the same sentence,' she said with a smile.

'On a general basis then.'

'Generally he's like a rubber ball; energetic, passionate; witty; always on the go and lots of fun. He can act all loud and opinionated, especially when he's had a drink, but underneath it all he's as soft as blancmange.'

Adam sipped his hot drink as he listened. 'He sounds like a real bloke's bloke.'

'He is. And I think that's why I'm so attracted to you. You are the polar opposite of everything he is.'

Adam choked on his coffee, spluttering it down the front of his shirt. 'You can't say that!' He brushed at the spilled liquid. 'You're not allowed to be attracted to me.'

'It's not like it's something I have any control over.'

'It's not right. You're a married woman.'

'I know.'

'So you can't be attracted to me. I'm ordering you to stop it.'

'I can't turn it off like a light switch.'

'I demand you do.'

'You can demand all you like, but it won't make a ha'peth of difference. I can't help being attracted to you, Adam. You are so different to what I'm used to. You represent everything that's been missing in my life.' She put down her cup and leaned toward him, placing her hand on his knee. 'There is a saying I like that always holds true - *The heart has its reasons, whereof reason knows nothing.*'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'That the heart has no sense. It simply wants what it wants.'

'And what does yours want?'

'Balance. Let me tell you, Adam, being married to Tom is like being on a roller coaster. I never know whether there's going to be a dip or a rise or a sharp bend, or if the car is going to come off the rails altogether. You are totally different. You are thoughtful, caring and gentle. You are quiet spoken and controlled and...you make me feel calm. Being with you relaxes me.'

He pressed her hand against his leg. 'I'm not sure how to take that,' he said, confusedly. 'I might be wrong, but I think you've just confirmed me to be a man so utterly boring that my mere company can put you to sleep?'

She slapped his leg, gently. 'That's not what I meant at all, silly. But I do find, as soon as I see you, I forget all the bad things going on, just for a while. Don't you feel the tiniest bit flattered to be thought attractive?'

'I don't know. I don't think I want you paying attention to me, Linda. I'm not worth the trouble it could cause. It's a rocky path you're putting your foot on there.'

'I'll take my chances, and you are worth it.'

'Why? You don't even know me...not properly.'

'I think...I hope...I'm getting to.'

'I don't want you to get hurt.'

'I won't. I can take care of myself.' She retrieved her cup and took a drink. 'Now where was I?'

Adam cleared his throat. 'Erm...thoughtful and caring I think you said.'

'Ah, yes, thoughtful and caring, along with which, underneath that dirty sweater and tatty old cap, there lurks a bright and intelligent man who speaks with eloquence and passion...'

'...and put together, Tom and I will make one complete, perfect person,' he added, half joking.

Linda considered the idea. 'Yes,' she said thoughtfully. 'That's it exactly, you've captured it perfectly. Between you, you and Tom are the two halves of the perfect man. Yin and Yang, black and white—'

'Pinky and Perky?'

'You can be the one who always wears the hat.'

They both howled with laughter, until Adam's expression changed to one of utmost seriousness.

'I don't want you to give me a second's thought until Tom is better,' he said. 'I want you to put all thoughts of coming here and wasting time with me right out of your head.'

'Tom will be my priority, of course he will, as he should, but I won't neglect you any more than I have to. If I don't come and see you, I want you to know it's not because I don't want to, it's because I can't. You understand?'

'Absolutely, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Are you going to be okay, managing him on your own?'

'We'll be fine. After six years of marriage I've cottoned on to what to expect when he's not well or upset or in pain, so I'll be ready for it.'

I know he gets overawed and overexcited and a bit too emotional about things he doesn't understand, coming over all stroppy and rude—'

'Violent?'

'No, never. Just childish tears and tantrums. I'm pretty used to it. I'm sure once he's settled back home and gets himself comfortable and his pain is under control, he'll be fine. In fact, it probably won't be any different from when he had his leg in plaster. It might even be easier. He should be more mobile and able to

do some things for himself. When he's safe to be left his own for a while, I can come and see you. You can put me back in balance again.'

'With pleasure.' He reached out his hand, inviting her to put hers in it. She did, and he clutched it tightly. 'But remember, I'm here whenever you want me. If I can help, I will.'

'Thank you, sweetheart. That's a perfect example of what I was talking about...thoughtful and caring.'

He raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it tenderly.

'What was that for?'

'It's been a gey long time since anyone called me sweetheart.'

Chapter 8

Linda welcomed her husband home.

Assisted by the attendant, he climbed gingerly out of the taxi ambulance, adjusted his elbow crutches, and proudly swung himself forward, progressing confidently down the front path.

The attendant, carrying Tom's holdall, closed the door to his vehicle and followed behind.

'Ta da!' Tom beamed. 'On my feet at last. Magic!' He edged his way through the doorway into the living room and dropped himself down onto the sofa to make a fuss of Archie, who was frantic with excitement.

Linda took the bag from the attendant and thanked him for his help. He pulled her aside, out of Tom's earshot.

'Don't worry if he seems a little odd,' he said, tipping his head toward Tom. 'He had a fair dose of painkillers before he set off, and they've made him a wee bit, shall we say, hyper. It'll wear off soon.'

Linda nodded her understanding. He handed her a bag from the hospital pharmacy. 'These aren't as strong, but make sure he doesn't have alcohol with them. It wouldn't be a good combination, if you know what I mean.'

'I think I do.'

'There's an envelope in his bag for you to give to his doctor, a list of instructions for him about keeping his wound clean.'

'Okey dokey.'

'If there's anything else you need, just ring your health centre. They'll help you.'

'You've all been wonderful,' she said. 'Thank you so much.'

'Nae problem. Now, I believe you have a wheelchair for me to take away.'

'There it is,' said Tom, pointing to the empty chair with his crutch. 'It's all yours and I hope never to see the blasted thing again.'

With a few deft moves, the attendant folded the wheelchair flat.

'Cheers, mate,' said Tom, a little too loudly, and grinning too broadly.

The attendant leaned close to Linda and winked a smile. 'Good luck,' he said.

She thanked him again and held open the door as he manoeuvred the chair outside, and after exchanging goodbyes, he left Linda to return to her pharmaceutically excited husband.

'Do you want a cup of tea, Tom?'

'Eh? Tea? Nah. I've drunk tea until it's coming out of my ears.'

'Coffee then?'

'No thanks.'

'Anything? Something to eat?'

'There's only one think I want. Come here,' He stretched out his arms to her. She moved closer and he grabbed her hand, pulling her down onto his lap. He dipped her and kissed her hard.

'Oh, God, Lind, how I've missed you.'

She wriggled in his hold. 'Be careful! Your leg!'

'It's fine, I'm fine,' he slapped his leg. 'The thigh's almost as good as new...and everything else is in tip top working order. Now give me a kiss, you luscious lovely.'

'You haven't been home five minutes yet. Take some time to settle in first—'

He seized her top in his teeth and shook it, uttering a low growl. 'I've got a lot of time to make up for.' His hands went under her top, fondling her breasts. 'After all those months in plaster, I'm raring to go.'

To demonstrate, he grabbed Linda's hand and placed it in his crotch. She could feel him growing hard under her hand.

'Get up those stairs right now,' he said, nibbling at her earlobe. 'I'm as horny as hell, and if you don't get on that bed, I'll have you right here where you sit.'

'I think we should wait—'

'I can't wait. If I do, something's going to explode and it's going to be messy!' He pushed her off his lap and slapped her bottom.

The crutches helped get him to the bottom of the stairs, then balancing carefully on one leg and using the banisters for support, hopped his way up to the bedroom.

Linda followed closely, staying one step behind, her arms outstretched, fully prepared to catch him should he fall. Using her as a prop, he hopped over to the bed and sat on the edge.

'Are you in any pain?' she asked.

'Not me! I have natural endorphins, and mixed with those pills it's a lethal combination...I can't feel a damned thing.'

He grinned, a wide, maniacal grin under gleaming eyes the size of dinner plates, their pupils almost totally dilated.

'Tom Lewis, you're as high as a kite!'

The grin broadened. 'Y-ep!'

He shuffled to the middle of the bed and threw himself back onto the heap of pillows, peeled off his sweatshirt, removed his tracksuit bottoms, and lay back in his under shorts, his hand on his crotch.

'Now, wench, get stripped. I'm getting ready for you...and it's going to be goooood!'

He pulled off his shorts to reveal a penis already at half mast, and he watched with barely restrained lust in his eyes as she slowly removed her clothing, revealing pink, lacy underwear beneath.

'Oooohoo, you tease,' he cooed, using both hands to masturbate.

She climbed on the bed, and taking great care to avoid his damaged limb, crawled onto him and sat astride his thighs.

His hands continued working furiously, rubbing, squeezing and stroking his cock and ball sack until he had reached his maximum hardness. He closed his eyes and enjoyed her laying a track of soft kisses over his

chest and down his stomach towards his groin, where he allowed her to take over his stimulation.

She teased his cock shaft and head with her tongue and her lips, and kissed her way up the velvet softness. She opened her mouth wide and took him in, her lips pressing around his shaft. He let out a string of groans and whimpers as her head bobbed up and down with a steady rhythm, his fingers entwined in her hair.

She coated his penis with saliva, and released him from her mouth with a loud suck. Holding the gusset of her panties aside, she lowered herself onto his erect member. As her wet heat enveloped him, he gasped and began to tremble.

'Oh, yeah, baby. That's it. That's it.'

She ground her groin into his, their pubic bones grating against each other. Almost immediately he began to buck and lurch under her, his climax reached. He gripped her thighs tightly, shuddered, and with a loud exhalation through gritted teeth, dropped back onto the bed, panting.

'Oh, yeeesss! That hit the spot. Yes indeedy.'

He pulled her down onto him and kissed her. 'Thank you, babe. That was just what the doctor ordered.'

'My pleasure darling.'

She lay down onto him, his chest heaving with sighs of fulfilment. A more familiar sound soon replaced the contented sighing; the gentle rhythm of a somnolent Tom's snoring.

She climbed off his rapidly diminishing erection, semen leaking from her, and covered him with the duvet. She pressed a kiss to his forehead and he moaned in his sleep. Wrapped in her dressing gown, she tiptoed from the room, leaving him in his drug and sex induced stupor.

He woke three hours later, ravenous – this time for food. Linda brought him supper on a tray and he ate it in bed, watching the news on TV. That night, after one more dose of painkillers and with his wife in bed beside

him, he enjoyed the soundest night's sleep in over four months.

Two days later, he was well enough to begin his Physiotherapy sessions at the local health centre. Back home after his ordeal, she arranged the cushions on the sofa for him.

'Sit yourself down and rest,' she said. 'You look exhausted.'

He did look pale and tired. 'It was hard. I think I might have overdone it.'

'I told you to take it easy. There's plenty of time, you don't want to do more harm than good. Do you want something to drink?'

'A cold beer would be nice.'

'No alcohol with those pills, remember. You'll have squash and like it.'

'Yes Matron.'

From the kitchen, she heard the TV go on and the familiar sounds of a cricket match. She prepared a glass of squash and delivered it to her weary husband.

'I think I need to take Archie for a walk,' she said. 'He hasn't been out for two days. He'll be getting fat. Will you be alright for an hour or so?'

Tom rubbed his eyes. 'Actually, I was thinking of having a quick nap, if you don't mind.'

'That would be perfect. You sleep, I'll walk the dog and you'll never even know I've been gone.' She picked up his feet and laid him flat on the sofa, tucking a cushion under his head. 'I won't be too long.'

She called Archie from his basket, and kissed Tom goodbye. He was asleep before she reached the end of the lane leading to the Oak Wood.

Chapter 9

Ten days since Linda had last been to the wood, she walked along the road until she could see the Castle. Where the road divided, left to Home Farm, right to Adam Strachan's home, she paused, took a deep breath, and called her dog to heel.

They set off along the right fork.

After ten minutes she reached the studded door at the rear of the Castle, raised her hand to knock, and hesitated.

Would Adam want to see her after so long?

Faint heart, et cetera.

She closed her eyes, took a breath, and rapped hard on the door. From within she heard a deep, muffled bark. Finn, at least, was home. She waited. The door remained firmly closed.

'Must be out.'

Already turned to walk back toward the road, the clatter of the cast iron handle being turned brought her back to the door. A creak of hinges and it swung open. At once Archie dashed in to find Finn. A dishevelled Adam blinked in the daylight.

He looked at her for a moment, as if struggling to recognise her.

'Linda? What are you doing here?'

'I was just passing and I thought I'd call in and see you. So how are you?'

'I'm...fine.' He opened the door wide, inviting her in. 'Sorry, where are my manners? Please, come on in.'

Taking care on the steps, she entered the gloomy kitchen. 'You're not doing anything special, are you? Am I disturbing you?'

'No...no, I wasn't doing anything at all.' He rubbed at his eye, and stifled a yawn with his hand.

'Oh, no,' she groaned apologetically. 'You were sleeping...and I've disturbed you.' She made her first

step toward the door. 'I should go and leave you in peace.'

He blocked her exit.

'Don't be silly,' he said. 'I dozed off in front of the fire like an old man. You're not disturbing me.' He plumped the cushion in the armchair. 'It's wonderful to see you. Please sit down.'

As she passed him to get to the chair, she thought she caught the faintest aroma of alcohol.

From his basket in front of the gently warming fire, Finn looked up at her with his sad, brown eyes. She sat in the armchair and bent forward to rub the dog's head. She also noticed the half empty bottle of whisky on the floor by his chair. No glass.

'It's been a while,' Adam said, filling the kettle and switching it on. 'What's happening in your life?'

'I just came by to tell you what's going on. The operation went well. Tom's home. He's settled in okay and he's on the mend, and I wanted to thank you again for your help and support.'

'I didn't do anything.'

'Just knowing you were here if I needed you was a great help...but mostly, I came to see you.'

He smiled embarrassedly and pulled at his ear.

'Aye, well—' The kettle whistled. 'Coffee okay?'

'Lovely, thanks.'

He took cups from the cupboard and examined them for chips and cracks, made coffee and passed her a mug. 'Do you want a biscuit?'

'No thanks.'

'Good, because I don't think I have any left.'

He dropped down into his own chair with a sigh, and rolled his neck as if to work out stiffness.

'Is your neck sore?'

He rubbed at it. 'A little. I think I've been sleeping awkwardly.'

'Would you like me to massage it for you?'

'No, there's no need.'

'Let's see, shall we? It might help.'

She put her cup on the floor, got up and stood behind his chair; leaned over and opened the top two buttons of his shirt, pulling the fabric away from his neck. From her bag she took out a tube of hand cream and squeezed a large blob into her palm. When her palms and fingers were warm and slick with the lubricating lotion, she put them into the crook of his neck and slid them in smooth, deep strokes over the his skin, up his neck, across his shoulders, massaging away the tightness she could feel there.

Eyes closed, he moaned softly as her gentle manipulation relieved the tension and the pain.

'Hmmm, that feels good.'

'I hope you don't mind smelling of coconuts for a while.'

'It's very nice, thank you.'

As she rolled and massaged his neck and shoulders, and he began to relax under her, she experienced a curious sensation – an overwhelming desire to run her hands through his hair, to kiss the nape and crook of his neck, to taste and smell him, to touch her lips to his skin and make him shrug against her. At one point, the temptation almost overpowered her, but she held firm, held her breath, swallowed her resolve, and focused on her massaging. Gradually the moment passed, and she continued working until all the lotion had been absorbed into his skin.

'Is that better?' she said.

Adam circled his neck, trying it out. 'Aye, much...thanks.'

She retook her seat, wiped residual lotion from her hands with a tissue, and looked across to Adam, to see him staring into the crackling flames of the fire.

'Is everything alright, Adam? You seem a little out of sorts.'

He glanced over to her and smiled wistfully. 'It's nothing your massage didn't cure?'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm fine...no problem at all.'

'Want to try again?'

He leaned his head against the back of his chair. 'It's the weather,' he said. 'It's so dreich and miserable, it leaches right into me, into my bones. Everything aches and I always seem to be cold.' He let out a deep, shuddering sigh. 'It wears me out.'

'It's been a long winter and a wetter than normal spring,' she said. 'But summer will soon be here and will warm you up.'

'I hope so.'

'But I don't think that's the only cause is it?'

'What do you mean?'

She looked around the room as if expecting to see water running down the walls. 'I'm going to be blunt here, Adam, so forgive me, but I think this horrid place is playing no small part.'

'This horrid place as you call it is my home.'

'I know and I appreciate the fact, but if it's affecting your health, it's one you need to get out sooner rather than later. How is your cottage coming along?'

'It has a roof, four walls, a door and windows.'

'Electric and water?'

'Aye.'

'So why not move in there? Even a building site has to be better than this.'

'I'm not ready to leave here just yet.'

'If you get ill, you might not have a choice. And it's not just you to think about. What about Finn? Don't you think he'd rather be warm and dry?'

At the mention of his name, the old dog flicked his heavy tail wearily against the side of his basket, and Adam stroked his broad black head.

'Aye, he would,' he said. 'He already has arthritis in his hips and it pains him to walk about. That's why he won't get out of bed.'

'Then do it for him, if not for yourself.'

'Aye.'

Silence.

'Can I help with anything?'

'Like what?'

'I can't do the technical stuff like Tom, making and fixing things, but I can paint and decorate pretty well, and hang curtains and suchlike. It might make the place a bit more homely for you?'

He gave her a tired smile. 'And give it the woman's touch? That would be nice.'

'Just say the word, Adam. I'd be happy to help.'

'I know. Let me think about it.'

He stirred the fire with the poker and carefully placed two more logs into the flames. They crackled and spat as they gave off their heat.

'Now that Tom is home again, will you be coming back for your walks?' he said.

Linda blew on her coffee. 'He can be left to his own devices now he can get about okay with his crutches, so yes, I think so.'

'And will you come and see me again?'

'Of course I will.'

'When?'

She went through her mental diary. 'How about...the day after tomorrow? Tom will be having his Physio in the morning, he'll have his lunch and then he'll probably have a nap, so I can go out for a couple of hours.'

'That would be nice. I can meet you on the bridge. What time can you get there?'

'Erm...not until about half past one.'

'I'll be there.'

He gave her a wide smile, the prospect of another meeting with her having cheered him.

She drained her cup. 'I'm going to have to go. Thanks for the coffee. Tom will probably be awake when I get back. I don't want to give him cause to worry if I'm away too long.'

She got to her feet. Adam stood with her.

'Thanks for coming, Linda. It's been good to see you...and thanks for the massage.'

'You're welcome. Just don't fall asleep in the chair again.'

'I'll try not to. And thanks for the pep talk.'

'Again, you're welcome. I meant what I said. Think about what I can do to help you with the cottage.'

'I will.'

She zipped up her coat. 'Come on Archie, you can't lie in bed all day. Bye Adam.'

She kissed Adam's cheek, and with her dog at her heel, she left him to his chair, his fire and his whisky bottle.

Over the next two weeks, a regular routine emerged. Linda left her husband playing with his computer, dozing, or watching TV on the sofa, and under the pretext of exercising Archie, slipped out of the house to meet with Adam Strachan.

They walked and talked, and he showed her the secrets of the wood - the woodpecker tree, the stone circle and the old icehouse. As they spent more and more time together, their friendship developed in its closeness.

They shared intimate confidences as they drank coffee in his kitchen, and their dogs shared a basket in front of the fire.

'Come with me,' said Adam one day. 'I want to show you something.'

They left the main path and passed through a small gate set in the fence. Linda followed his footsteps as he led her by the hand through a thick carpet of sweet smelling bluebells, and deeper into the woodland.

Archie chased a fat wood pigeon, almost as big as himself. The bird rose into the air with a loud flapping of its wings and Archie leapt up after it, snapping at its tail.

'Here,' Adam said.

The space before them stood filled by a gigantic oak tree, its branches gnarled with age, its distinctly shaped leaves newly unfurled. The sun penetrated the fresh green canopy, but around the tree, for the span of its branches, there lay a thick layer of dry leaf litter and empty acorn shells where nothing grew. The other trees

appeared to be keeping a respectable distance from the King of Trees.

'This is quercus robur, English Oak. Isn't it magnificent?' he said, lovingly stroking the bark of the tree's trunk.

'I thought you Scots despised anything English.'

'Ach, for this, I make an exception.'

Linda slowly circled the tree clockwise, allowing her hand to trail over the trunk. 'How old is it?' she asked.

'Someone measured it once and guessed at about seven hundred years.'

She laid her cheek against the bark as if listening for a sound from within. 'And this is the heart of the Oak Wood?'

'That's exactly what it is, its heart...and its soul. Every other oak tree in the wood probably came from this...hundreds, maybe thousand of children over the years.'

She rounded the tree, gazing up into the branches, caressing the bark with her hand.

'It's beautiful.'

A collision. Unexpected, yet not unwelcome.

Eyes met and locked, his grey to her blue, and then rough working man's hands cradled her face.

'So are you,' he said.

His lips were not rough when they met hers; they were soft and warm, and imparted a kiss so filled with passion, its intensity frightened her.

'Forgive me. I couldn't resist. I had to do it,' he said, when they parted.

She put her hand against his scratchy cheek. 'If you hadn't, I would have had to do it for you.'

'You didn't mind?'

'No, and I wouldn't mind...if you did it again.'

She slid her arms around him, losing herself in a second kiss as powerful as the first.

When he let her go, she studied the man before her - the variations in the grey of his eyes, his long lashes and the fine lines giving his tanned face so much character, coarse stubble adding to the ruggedness of his features.

He in turn regarded her – the slight framed woman in his arms with her auburn hair moving in the breeze, her pert nose with its many freckles, and her pale blue eyes with dilated pupils signifying her pleasure in his company. He pushed a stray strand of hair from her face, stroked the skin of a cheek no longer in the first flush of youth, but still smooth and flawless, and pressed a gentle kiss to it.

She found herself enclosed in a tight embrace, and they held each other in the shade of the mighty tree, Archie looking on, head cocked in confusion, the silent keeper of their secret.

Back at the dark and dingy rooms Adam called home, the couple sat at the kitchen table, mugs of tea in front of them.

'Why aren't you married?' asked Linda. 'A good looking bloke like you should be beating women off with a stick.'

Adam laughed quietly. 'I've had the odd date, but I always I turn out to be a wee bit of a disappointment at the end of the night. Women hear the name, they know who I am, or was, they know where I live and think they've bagged a country landowner loaded with cash. And then I bring them here. They take one look at the state of this place, realise I don't have two pennies to rub together and I don't see them again for dust. Be honest, can you really blame them?'

She let her gaze drift up to the ceiling with its peeling paint, and the stringy cobweb clinging to the light bulb, moving in the draught.

No. She couldn't.

'It's not fair that you're on your own,' she said. 'No matter where they live or how much money they have – or don't have - no-one should be on their own.'

He shrugged and sighed. 'C'est ma vie. I'm getting used to it.'

She fixed her earnest gaze on him. 'You're very lonely aren't you, Adam? All alone here by yourself. No friends. No family. Just Finn.'

'Erm...' he hesitated, taken aback by her forthrightness. 'Sometimes, I suppose, but I have you come visit...and the rats. Don't forget the rats, although they're not too hot on conversation.'

His attempt at levity fell on stony ground.

'Well you can rest easy, because it won't be for much longer. I'll be moving out soon and when I'm warm and dry, clean and tidy and sweet smelling again, I can...socialise. '

'Is the cottage coming along then?'

'Aye. I've had some people in...plasterers, plumbers and the like. Tell you what, why don't you come visit. You can cast your eagle eye over it, and see that everything comes up to scratch.'

'I'd love to.'

'When? Tomorrow?'

'No. Sorry.'

'Oh,' he said, clearly disappointed. 'When then? Soon?'

'Soon, but...' She rubbed her forehead as she thought. 'We have friends coming to stay at the weekend; Tom has an Outpatients' appointment on Monday; I have to taxi him to and from Physio on Tuesday and Friday, and then I have to go shopping on Wednesday so...Thursday is the best I can do.'

'Thursday it will have to be then.'

'I'll bring my tape measure.'

Chapter 10

'Remember I'm going out for the afternoon,' Linda said over breakfast on Thursday. 'There's that talk on at the library I wanted to go to.'

'Which one was that again?'

'The one about the role of women in Dickens' life and how they impacted on his stories.'

'Oh that.' He yawned widely. 'Whatever floats your boat.'

'Philistine. I take it you won't want to come then?'

'I'd rather stick pins in my eyes if it's all the same to you.'

'Thought you might. There's coffee and biccies afterwards but it shouldn't last more than a couple of hours. Will you be alright on your own?'

'Don't you worry about me. I'll find something to do.'

'Such as?'

'Watch a DVD, drink some beer, have a long and satisfying wank...the usual.'

She feigned her disgust. 'Tom Lewis, you are truly incorrigible.'

'I hope that means something good,' he said.

'It means you're beyond reform; a deep rooted, dyed-in-the-wool caveman, with manners to match.'

He gave her a wicked grin. 'And don't you just love it?'

Adam turned the key in the front door of his compact, granite built cottage. It squeaked open, affording them direct access into the bare interior.

'Must put some oil on that,' he said, ushering Linda inside. 'Here we are; home sweet home. Mind the tools.'

She stepped over the threshold and looked around as he forced the stiff door back into its frame.

'It looks bigger on the inside,' she said, her voice resonating in the empty, comfortably sized room.

A bay window almost filled one wall, letting in plenty of natural light through its numerous small, square panes. The walls and ceiling had the blotchy pinkish-brown of drying plaster and the air carried the smell of a clean, fresh dampness, not the cold, unpleasant mustiness of the Castle. New doors, still wrapped in clear plastic, leaned against a wall, and more bags of plaster were neatly stacked on the bare floorboards. Several power tools, most of which Linda recognised from Tom's work, were lying abandoned. In one corner stood cans of paint, rollers and brushes.

'This will be the sitting room cum living room cum everything room,' he said, indicating the space in which they stood. 'And this...' He led her through a roughly rectangular gap in the wall. '...will be the kitchen diner, where I will entertain my multitude of guests to lavish dinner parties.'

Kitchen units, flat packed in cardboard boxes, were piled up, awaiting assembly. Under the window, a stainless steel sink and drainer had already been plumbed in, hanging from a bracket on the wall and supported at the front corners by two pillars of bricks, waiting on its permanent fixing. Cooking facilities appeared to constitute only a single primus burner, one pan, two mugs and a new electric kettle. There was no fridge, or stove.

'It's a bit primitive, but I manage. I'll have all mod cons when I'm done, you'll see,' he said.

'What's upstairs?' she asked.

'Two bedrooms and a small bathroom.'

'Can I see?'

He led her up the newly installed staircase to a small landing, holding her hand for safety in the absence of a banister. A window, as narrow as an arrow slit, allowed a shaft of sunshine to force its way in to lie in a sharp stripe on the dusty floorboards. He pointed to each of the rooms in turn, none of which as yet had a door.

'My bedroom...the bathroom...and a spare room where I can keep my golf clubs...and...um, that's it.'

'It looks very cosy. Much nicer than—'

'—than the hovel I'm in now?'

'I wasn't going to say that—'

'But it's what you meant. It's okay. You're right. I've got to face facts; it's not fit for human habitation any more. The sooner I get in here the better.'

She examined the small bathroom first, pleased to see a basin, a bath with a shower over and a lavatory, all in a sparkling hygienic white.

'It'll do,' she said.

She crossed the landing and peered through the doorway of the room Adam had assigned to himself.

'This is going to be the master bedroom I take it?'

'It's hardly big enough to be called master, but aye, it is.'

Under his watchful gaze, she went in. On the floor lay a mattress with a sleeping bag and pillow, and she noticed familiar looking scraps of material bundled into black bin liners - his clothes.

'Have you stayed here already?'

'Once or twice, when it was too late or I was too tired to go back to the Castle.'

She picked it up a battered gas lantern from beside the makeshift bed.

'This looks a bit dangerous. I thought you said the power was on.'

'It is.' He flicked a switch on the wall by the door, and the single bare bulb glowed into life to demonstrate.

'What kind of heating have you put in?'

'There's the woodburner downstairs, and this...' He picked up an electric fan heater. 'But I intend to put in full central heating...a radiator in every room. So now you've seen everything, will you stop worrying?'

'Maybe. It certainly is better than the Castle. It's warmer and drier at least.'

'And there are no spiders. I saw you looking.'

She crossed to the window and leaned on the deep sill. The view included the nearby edge of the Oak Wood.

'I can just about see the wood,' she said. 'What will happen to it when you leave the Castle?'

His arms closed around her waist, hugging her close with his chest pushed against her back, and his chin rested on her shoulder.

'Nothing,' he said. 'It will always be mine. It was the only part of the estate I steadfastly refused to sell. I won't have it torn out just so they can build some cheesy housing estate on it. I'll be hunting down poachers and trespassers for years to come yet. No one will ever get their hands on it until I'm dead and gone, maybe not even then. I'll never let it go.'

His passion for his beloved woodland moved something deep inside her and it writhed in her stomach like a snake, a sensation she felt to be not unpleasant, and she put her hands over his, pressing them against her.

'How will you manage without income from the estate and Home Farm?'

His cheerless sigh moved her hair. 'To be honest, I've tried not to think about it,' he said. 'Most of the money from the sale is already gone on taxes and debts, but there's a wee bit left and I'm hoping it will be enough to see me through the next year or so. I can't guarantee it though. I might have to make some sacrifices here and there.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be nose-y,' she said. 'I can't begin to imagine what a strain it's all been on you.'

'Aye, it has been a strain, but I have to face the grim reality of it; none of it is mine any more. It's all gone. The house, the estate, the lairdship, it's all been in our family for more than three hundred years, and it all ends with me. I lost it all. I let them all down.'

She turned to him, and seeing his face carrying an expression of such abject sadness and emptiness, her eyes filled to the brim with glittering tears.

He gathered her in his arms and held her to him.

'Hey now, don't let my miserable plight upset you. I'll be okay. I'll always have the wood. It will always be mine. I'll find something to do. I'll be fine.'

He wiped away her spilled tears and lovingly kissed her cheek. '...so long as you promise to come and visit me here, often, I'll be just fine.'

'I will,' she assured him. 'As often as I can.'

He passed his fingertips over her lips and she parted them slightly.

'Do you have any idea how much I want to kiss you right now?' he whispered.

She shook her head. 'No, but I wish you would.'

He held her cheeks in his large hands and lightly touched his lips to hers, felt her breath as she sighed, and more firmly kissed her again. She closed her eyes, accepting his kiss, her arms around him.

He kissed the side of her neck and down her throat, and she moaned softly as his stubbled cheek burned her skin.

'Oh, Linda, I want you so much,' he murmured, inhaling the fragrance of her silky hair.

She broke his hold and took a single step back.

'I'm sorry...I shouldn't have...' he flustered, then realised, she had not pushed him away to reject him, but to give herself room to, ever so slowly, and silently, unbutton her blouse, exposing her lacy white brassiere.

She took his hand, kissed the palm and placed it on the generous swell of her breast.

'Take what you want,' she said. 'It's yours.'

He moved his hand over the warm firmness her breast, cupping it and kissing the mound of smooth pale flesh. He ran his other hand over her waist and up her back and drew her back to him, kissed her again and took her blouse from her.

They undressed each other, stopping frequently to touch and kiss and explore one another, as he lay her down on the sleeping bag spread out on the mattress.

She let him take his time getting to know her. He stroked her hair and skin with his hands and his lips, smelled her scent and tasted her with his tongue. He learned his way around her body, making a mental map of every inch of her. When, eventually, he entered her, he did it slowly and carefully, but wholly.

She welcomed him inside her with warm wetness and moved with him, relishing the slow and easy sensations of making love, and reaching orgasm, with a man who was not her husband.

When they were done, they lay in a close embrace, both enveloped in the glow of deep contentment.

He ran his hand up and down her bare back and she heard him sniff quietly. When he gave a small hiccup which sounded to her like a sob, she drew herself up to look at his face. Tears had leaked from the corners of his eyes and left wet trails.

'What's the matter? Did I do something wrong?'

He gave her a weak smile and a small laugh. 'You did nothing wrong at all.'

'Then why so sad?'

He wiped the wetness from his face. 'I'm not sad...I'm happy. So very happy. It's been a fair while since I've been with anyone. I'd forgotten just how wonderful it could be.'

'Would it be crass of me to ask...how long has it been?'

He scratched his eyebrow with his thumbnail. 'About three years,' he said. 'I told you, they run away long before we can get that far.'

It appalled her that anyone could go so long without making love.

'Oh, you poor sweet thing, that's dreadful.'

She pecked a kiss to the end of his nose.

'It seems to me I might have to put you on a refresher course.'

He laughed, the tears forgotten. 'I think you might at that.'

'Are you one of those students who will need a lot of reminding?'

'Oh aye, indeed. I'm a gey slow learner, and not very clever, so you'll have to go o'er it...again and again...and again. Will there be a test?'

'You can count on it.'

When Linda returned home, to the sight of her husband limping slowly and carefully into the kitchen to greet her, a niggling twinge of guilt nibbled at her sense of gratification. She pushed it aside.

'Hello, babe,' he said cheerfully. 'How was your talk?'

She kicked off her shoes. 'Very interesting. What have you been up to?'

'Nothing much. Watched a programme on the TV about cowboy builders. Turned it off. Made me depressed.'

'Oh darling. You'll be back at work soon.'

'Not soon enough,' he said. 'I'm going stir crazy at home all day; I can't stand it a minute longer.'

With an exaggerated 'Aarrgggh!' he rolled his eyes and grabbed at handfuls of his hair, as if to pull it out in frustration. His silliness made her laugh and she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him to her.

'You are a daft bugger, and I do love you.'

He returned the hug, almost crushing her ribs.

'I know you do my pet.' He looked at her askance. 'Hang on a minute. You've not pranged the car again have you?'

'Yes, it's a write off, but I still really, really love you.'

'Well that's okay then.'

Their kiss was long and deep and filled with mutual love, and any residual guilt evaporated without a trace.

Their lovemaking that night was energetic. Tom, sweating and panting, dropped back onto the pillows with his hands clasped behind his head, and declared his satisfaction at an orgasm well enjoyed.

'You know, I think I get better at this every time we do it,' he said smugly.

'You get more modest too.'

She rolled herself across him and laid her head on his chest and he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her head.

'Yeeeeaaaah,' he growled and stretched his body until every muscle tautened, before relaxing again with a sigh. 'One day, I guarantee the sex will be so mind-

blowingly magnificent the neighbours will want a cigarette.'

'What do you mean one day?'

He scratched at his pubic hair, through which his penis still stood proudly erect. He let his hand stray to it and gave it a comforting stroke. 'Give the little fella a minute, and he'll show you.'

Linda chuckled quietly at his blatant display of virility, and he ran his hand up and down her spine, fingering each of her vertebrae. The touch brought back the memory of Adam's coarse hand doing the same thing only hours previously.

Despite his manual work, Tom's hands were always smooth and soft, feminine almost. Adam's in contrast seemed more like the bark of the oak tree he loved, rough, strong, masculine.

Another contrast.

Minutes later, Tom declared himself recharged and ready to pleasure her again, and she did not deny him.

Chapter 11

'That's great - thanks, Bill - yes - sure - thanks for calling - see you later.'

The one sided conversation ended and Tom hung up the telephone to hobble, without sticks, into the kitchen. He grasped Linda round the waist and nuzzled her neck.

'That was Bill Paterson,' he said. 'You'll never guess what...'

'Nope, you got me. What?'

'The firm has got the contract...we're doing the conversion.'

She continued with the washing up. 'What conversion?'

Tom picked up a tea towel and began drying a plate. 'At the Castle you witless woman. I told you we were tendering for it.'

Linda's heart crawled into her throat. 'You'll be working at the Castle. The one in the park?'

'How many other castles do you know around here? They're making it into a fancy country hotel, and the firm's got the contract. It means at least a year of full-time proper work, and loads and loads of lovely, filthy money.' He beamed with glee at the prospect.

Linda however was not smiling. 'Are you sure you're ready to go back to work, darling? Will you be fit enough? You're still having Physio.'

'We don't start until the beginning of June, so yeah, I'll be ready. I'll make damned sure I am.' He hugged her tightly and lifted her off her feet. 'See,' he said. 'Almost strong enough already.'

'I see.'

Adam received Linda's news with impassivity as he hung his damp washing on a wooden clothes maiden in front of the fire.

'I didn't know until yesterday,' she said. 'Tom's firm just got the contract and rounded up the workers. Tom was at the top of the list because he's the best joiner carpenter they've got.'

'When are they starting?' he said around a peg held between his teeth.

'First week in June, Tom says. Haven't they told you yet?'

He pegged a shirt firmly in place. 'Nope.'

'You should have been the first to know.'

He snorted a laugh. 'They're not going to bother telling me.' He made a quick mental calculation. 'Three more weeks.'

'Is the cottage ready yet?'

'Not yet. There are still some bits to do.'

'Let me help. I'll ask Tom to do some work for you. It should speed you along and get him back into the swing of things. I won't tell him who it's for and he'll be glad of the work.'

Adam frowned and rubbed his hand over his furrowed forehead.

'Do you realise the insanity of what you've just said? You want *your* husband do work on *my* cottage in order to get me out of here quicker, so that he can come in with his firm of cowboy fixer-uppers and rip this place apart after I've gone?'

'I know it sounds mad, but yes,' she said. 'And they are *not* cowboys; they'll do an excellent job.'

Adam blew out a derisive 'Pfft.'

'This place is a hole,' she said. 'I wouldn't let a dog live here. It's so cold and damp—' She shuddered. 'So you should take any help you can get—'

'Forget it!' he snapped. 'I'm doing the work myself and it'll take as long as it takes.'

'You don't have the time.'

'Then they'll have to wait for me, won't they?' He kicked the empty laundry basket across the room; it landed upside down against the stove.

Linda picked it up and placed it on the table. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to upset you, but

something has to be done. You said yourself it's not fit for human habitation any more.'

'I've been here all my life, such as it is. I'm not going to be forced out before I'm ready.'

'You might not have any choice,' she said. 'They won't let you stay once they start. It will be too dangerous. There'll be scaffolding and noise and dust—'

'I'll manage.'

'...and it'll be painful for you to watch them ripping the guts out of your home and throwing it all in skips to take to the dump.'

He scowled at her, pulled out a chair and dropped down onto it. Elbows resting on the table, he wearily pinched his eyes and the bridge of his nose.

'I know I have to leave,' he said. 'But I can't seem to bring myself to do it. My head says get out, but my heart...it won't let go.'

Linda stroked her fingers through his hair

'Let me help you, Adam. If we do it together, it might not be so bad.'

Sad grey eyes looked up at her, and with a deep resigned sigh, he nodded.

'Good. I'll come by tomorrow and help you pack. Okay?'

'Oka—'

His reply ended abruptly, choked by a rough cough.

The next day, Linda arrived at the Castle, ready to begin work. From her backpack she took a roll of black plastic bin liners, and tore one off.

'Where do you want me to start?' she said.

Adam sat unmoving in the armchair, his head resting heavily on his hand, staring fixedly into the fire.

'Wherever you like,' he mumbled, his voice flat and lifeless.

She inspected the wooden crates stacked against the wall. 'I noticed these boxes before. What's in them?'

'Just stuff.'

Unhelpful.

'Do you want to start in the other room instead?'

'There's nothing much in there.'

'Bathroom then?'

'Ditto.'

'We can go through the cupboards in here.'

'Whatever you want.'

Frustrated by his lack of co-operation, she squatted beside his chair to run her hand up and down his arm, the material of his shirt worn into softness.

'I know you don't want to do this,' she said, gently. 'And I know it's going to be possibly the hardest thing you've ever done, but you don't have any choice.'

He dropped his head onto the back of the chair, staring up at the ceiling.

'We'll take it slowly. A little bit at a time.' She tugged at his arm. 'Come on. If we nibble at it, it won't be so bad.'

'No!'

He sat up and snatched the bag from her hand, screwing it into a ball. 'We're not doing it. Not yet. Not today.'

'Then when? You're running out of time.'

'I don't know! Just leave it!'

'We can't leave it. You know it's for your own good.'

He glared at her. 'Don't you tell me what is or isn't for my own good,' he rumbled. 'Who do you think you are?'

'I'm sorry,' she said, standing and reaching for her coat. 'I'm interfering where I have no right to. You're quite right. You know when the best time is. I've known you for all of five minutes and I've marched right in here and tried to take over. I'll go and leave you make your own decisions—'

'No,' he said, grasping at the hem of her sweater. 'Don't go. I don't want you to go. Please stay. Talk sense to me. Convince me this is the right thing to do.'

She pushed him back in the chair and lowered herself onto his lap, winding her arms around his neck and pressing her cheek to his.

'It's the right thing to do,' she whispered, her lips against his neck. 'It's the only thing you can do.'

Chapter 12

'I'm taking Archie for his walk,' said Linda as she slipped on her shoes and reached for the dog's lead hanging on its hook beside the back door.

She had arranged to meet Adam at the bridge, and only had a few minutes to reach their rendezvous. She didn't want to keep him waiting.

'Wait for me,' said Tom. 'I'd like to come with you today.'

'What?'

'The Physio says I'm perfectly fine to walk as far as I want,' he said. 'It's only a couple of weeks until I start work. I want to be in tip top condition.'

'I go a long way and it's a rough path—'

'I'm up to it, don't worry. Crikey, Linda, anyone would think you didn't want me to come? What have you got to hide?'

Concerned her attempts at dissuasion might arouse suspicion, she reluctantly conceded.

'Nothing...nothing at all. Of course you can come, I'd love the company.'

She walked a little slower along the path to allow Tom to keep up, but he seemed to be having no trouble.

They walked together down the hill towards the bridge, and as they rounded the bend, her heart froze.

There was Adam, his shotgun over his arm, striding towards them, having set out early hoping to meet her on her way to their assignation.

Had he seen her and Tom together? Would he, please God, act accordingly and pretend he didn't know her?

He might, but Archie wouldn't.

He ran forwards to greet Adam, and sniffed his boots eagerly for scent of his friend, Finn.

He then sat begging for a treat.

'Good God, look at that!' exclaimed an amazed Tom, and hailed the stranger. 'Morning!'

'Morning to you,' Adam replied pleasantly.

'My dog seems to like you,' said Tom. 'It's amazing. Usually he would show his nasty little teeth and have a nip at your ankles, telling you to back off. You must be some kind of magician.'

Adam smiled down at Archie. 'It's nae secret,' he said, and put his hand in his pocket, withdrew a treat and threw it a short distance away. Archie wagged his pleasure as he hunted for it.

'It's not who you are, it's what's you've got in your pocket,' he said.

Archie, having found and swallowed his treat, returned for another. He was to be disappointed.

'Enjoy your walk,' said Adam giving his small salute against the peak of his cap. 'Stay on the path, if you wouldn't mind.'

His eyes met Linda's for no more than the briefest moment, before he walked off up the path and through the small gate into the Oak Wood.

The exchange however had not gone unnoticed by Tom.

'Do you know him?'

'I've...um, seen him about,' Linda said. 'We've exchanged hellos a few times.'

'Which would explain why Archie seems to know him?'

'You know Archie. He can sniff out a treat a mile away.'

Tom glanced over his shoulder, but Adam had already vanished into the wood. 'Did you see that gun?' he said. 'Do you think it was loaded?'

Linda shrugged. 'I suppose so. It wouldn't be a lot of use if it wasn't, would it? Do you want to go on or have you had enough?'

'I think I can manage a bit further.'

They did not encounter Adam again on their walk, but throughout it Linda had an unsettling feeling of being watched.

Chapter 13

Linda's visits to Adam's home at the Castle came to an end at seven o'clock on the first Monday morning in June, when Tom left to start his first day at his new employment.

The nature of his job as a joiner carpenter meant early starts, and Linda, as always, cooked him a full Scottish breakfast while he, whistling cheerfully, showered and dressed.

While he fuelled himself for the work ahead, she went back to the comfort and warmth of the duvet.

Then came the tramp of his boots on the stairs. A steady slog. Not limping so much now. He really was better. The old Tom was back.

He poked his head around the bedroom door.

'I'm off,' he said, tiptoeing in to sit on her side of the bed. 'I'll be back about five thirty.'

She draped her arms around his neck and offered him a tender kiss. 'Have a nice day, darling.'

'You can count on it,' he said, 'I've been looking forward to this so much.'

'And please be careful. No more accidents.'

'I'll do my best.' He nuzzled his face into her cleavage. 'You have my meal on the table when I get home, wench, 'cos I'm going to build up quite an appetite...and not just for food.'

With a final peck to her pyjama clad breast, and another to her cheek, he left her. Moments later she heard the kitchen door slam, followed by the squeak of the garden gate.

With his tools distributed between backpack and panniers, Tom set off on the short cycle ride to the Castle, down the lane at the rear of the house, the same one where Linda walked daily.

As arranged, she met Adam by the bridge. In contrast to the bright, sunny warmth of the day, he looked a picture of misery.

'Is it bad? Are they making a mess?' she said.

He simply nodded, too distressed to speak. She bowed her head, not wanting to meet his eyes.

'I'm sorry.'

He took her hand. 'It's not your fault.'

'Somehow I feel like it is. Tom is my husband and he's part of doing something which is hurting you. I can't help but feel at least partly responsible.'

He lifted her chin to look into her eyes. 'Don't be ridiculous. You are not to blame for anything.'

'It wouldn't be so bad if Tom wasn't taking such pleasure at being back at work. He's practically ecstatic.' Tears welled in her eyes. 'Oh, why couldn't it be somewhere...anywhere else?'

Adam squeezed her hand. 'It's okay.'

'No it isn't.'

'No. It isn't.' He tugged her hand. 'Come on, let's walk.'

Adam knew every inch of the paths, and she had confidence in his guidance. A twenty minute trek had them past the giant oak at the heart of the Oak Wood and out the other side. The path ended at a gate in the fence, beyond which lay another track, deeply gouged with tyre tracks where a vehicle had recently been.

'Where does this go?' she said, hopping over the muddy grooves to a clean strip of grass between.

Adam continued ahead. 'You'll see.'

A few minutes' walk led them to the back of a small, neat dwelling. Smoke curled from its chimney and a familiar looking checked shirt hung from a piece of twine strung between two saplings growing nearby.

'This is your cottage!' Linda declared. 'You found a back route.'

'I didn't find it, it was always here.'

Through a gate at the bottom of the cottage's garden, along a path between long neglected vegetable plots, to the rear door.

Adam fished keys from his jeans pocket, unlocked the door, and they went inside.

'You haven't done much in this room since I was last here,' she said, looking around the kitchen. She dashed through the gap in the wall to the living room.

'Or in here.'

'I've done quite a bit, actually. Most of it upstairs. Come and see.' He took her hand and led her up the stairs to the landing.

'What are you smiling at?'

'It's not often I get to take a pretty lady upstairs,' he said.

'Are you going to show me your etchings?'

He chuckled. 'If I still had some, I'd be glad to.'

She could see he had indeed been busy. Architraves fitted; skirting boards; and the bathroom and bedrooms all had doors. A coat of magnolia emulsion paint had been applied to the bedroom wall, although a little patchy in places. It definitely needed another coat to finish it off properly.

'Very nice,' Linda said, pleased with his progress.

'I've had a lot of spare time on my hands.'

They sat together on the dusty top step, his arm loosely around her shoulders and she took hold of his wrist, dismayed to discover his expensive watch replaced by one with a plain dial and a simple leather strap.

I bet he sold it, to pay for the improvements.

She pulled up her knees and rested her chin on them.

'I'm sorry I couldn't help you more with your packing.'

'S'okay.'

'And I can't now that Tom's working at the Castle...'

'I know. It's okay. I girded my loins and got on with it. I'm done. Everything but the kitchen sink is in boxes, bags and tea chests.'

'So where is it?'

'I said I'd packed it, not moved it. I have until the end of the week, and I'm going to stay until the last minute of the last day.'

He jutted his chin defiantly.

'You really are a pig-headed sod, aren't you?' she said.

He gave her a sideways look. 'Takes one to know one, wouldn't you say?'

She stood and brushed dust from her backside. 'You could at least have brought the chairs?'

Chapter 14

Adam claimed he would be busy all the next day with 'things to do', and Linda kept herself occupied with chores at home, until an unexpected find in the kitchen sent her on her way to the Castle.

When she got there, she found it all but unrecognisable, a veritable as well as a literal building site.

Suddenly, a cry came down to her from high up on the scaffolding.

'Hoy! Miss! Don't walk there. It's dangerous.'

She shielded her eyes and craned her neck to see a man in a yellow hard hat looking down at her.

'I'm looking for Tom Lewis,' she called up to him.

He pointed to a spot by a tree about twenty feet away. 'Go and stand over there, and I'll get him for you.'

A few minutes later, Tom, kitted out in his own hard hat and tool belt, strolled across the gravelled area to her. 'What is it Lind? Is something wrong?'

She held up a supermarket bag, a rectangular blue box and a thermos flask visible through the opaque plastic. 'You forgot your lunch, dopey.'

He took the bag from her. 'Aw thanks, babe. But why did you not phone? I would have come home for it.'

'It was no trouble and Archie likes the walk. Everything okay here?'

'Yeah, it's all good. Oh, I have something to tell you. Remember that guy we met in the woods, the scruffy one with the gun?'

'Hmmm.'

'Well you'll never believe it, but he's the guy who used to own this place. His name's Strachan, and apparently, he's a right sodding oddball. We're pulling his house down around his ears and he's still squatting in the cellar. What an idiot. Can you believe anyone can be that stupid?'

'Maybe he doesn't have anywhere else to go,' she said.

Tom snorted. 'He's going to have to get a wriggle on and find somewhere. He can't stay there. Paterson's fuming. He'll soon shift him though.' He held up the bag. 'Thanks for this, love. I've gotta get back or I'll have my pay docked. See ya!'

A quick goodbye kiss and a wave, and he disappeared back into his place of work.

Linda too set out, ostensibly down the driveway towards home.

Using the bushes for cover, she doubled back and made her way to the rear of the building.

The Land Rover was gone.

She tried the door to the cellar; unlocked. She pushed it open a crack.

'Adam? You here?'

No reply. She went in.

The room was dark and dingy and quiet, save the odd crackle from the guarded fire. Finn's empty basket stood in front of the hearth. Wherever Adam had gone, he had taken the dog with him.

Despite the fire, the room felt chilly. Linda stepped carefully over to the fireplace and prodded the fire with the poker. When it showed a bit more life, she placed two more small logs to burn.

Taking stock of the room she saw the stack of crates and boxes had grown larger, but Adam had not been telling the whole truth. There was still plenty to pack, and what remained was a chaotic mess, particularly the pile of assorted material on the table.

The first item she picked from the heap, a checked shirt, thick and warm and worn threadbare at the collar and cuffs. She touched the soft material first against her cheek and then to her nose and sniffed at it – the fresh, clean aroma of laundry powder.

In her mind she tried to picture Adam sitting in the laundrette watching his washing churning in the machine, and the image made her smile.

She found the roll of black bags and tore one off, carefully folded each item of clothing and placed it in the bag, and when it was full, tied off the top securely.

'Anything else?'

She looked around for any stray items, spotting a sweater, dirty and full of holes, thrown over the back of one of the armchairs. She picked it up and put it close to her face to inhale the smell Adam she expected to be on the garment. Instantly, she recoiled, gagging, the stench reminding her of the time her drains had been blocked and the toilet had overflowed. She put the sweater back and looked for somewhere to wash her hands.

In the far corner of the kitchen, the sink, piled high with dirty plates and cups. She turned on the hot water tap. After five minutes, it still ran cold.

'No hot water? Now that's just not civilised.'

She heated water in the kettle and poured it into the sink, adding a drop of detergent from the near empty bottle. Within a few minutes, the dishes were clean and dried and stacked neatly on the worktop, ready for packing in the next available box.

She turned her attention to the cabinets, finding only a few slices of bread - showing spots of green mould, an almost empty jar of strawberry jam, also slightly fuzzy, half a packet of biscuits, and a box of cereal with a hole from which some of the contents had spilled.

She noticed too the waft of ammonia and dozens of tiny black pellets.

Mice!

No fridge; no fresh fruit or vegetables. A half full bottle of milk stood in a bowl of cold water in an attempt to keep it cool and fresh.

'What on earth is he eating?'

A pan on the stove gave her the answer; stew - rabbit by the look and smell of it, and at least two days old. She wrinkled her nose in disgust and replaced the lid.

Heat from the now blazing fire had percolated as far as the hearth, and to Archie resident in Finn's bed.

She left him where he was while she explored further, through the door in corner, into Adam's bedroom.

Whereas the kitchen was dim because its window was filthy, the bedroom was dark because the only small window in the room had its shutters closed, blocking out most of the light. She felt around for the switch on the wall and clicked it on. She needn't have bothered. The feeble light from the bulb made very little difference, but sufficient for her to make out a large brass bedstead, ornate, beautiful, and far too large for this tiny space, and the untidy heap of bedclothes on it.

An unmade bed - an abhorrence to be rectified. Lumpy pillows were punched into shape, the sheet smoothed, coarse blankets folded and tucked in, eiderdown arranged over everything. Neat and tidy again.

'Better,' she said, despite the unpleasant chilly dampness in every item.

'What else?'

Squatting on her haunches, she peered under the bed.

'Hello.'

A box, full of assorted books and magazines. She rummaged through them, not particularly surprised when she came across more than one sample of rather explicit pornography.

'Filthy beggar.'

She pushed the box back into place and opened a smaller one filled with official looking papers, old bills and photographs, picking through them with interest before carefully replacing the lid and putting it back where she found it.

Another door, fully two feet up the wall revealed a closet, empty apart a single hangar from which hung Adam's best green shirt, his grey flannel trousers, a tie and his jacket. On the floor, a pair of almost decent looking shoes. Nothing more.

Exploring further, she came across the pokey bathroom with its stained lavatory, seat up of course, and an undersized washbasin over which hung a small,

cracked mirror. On a makeshift shelf sat a glass tumbler containing a well worn toothbrush, an almost empty tube of toothpaste and a cheap disposable razor. Sharing the shelf with the tumbler were cans of deodorant and shaving gel, a hairbrush and a chipped pottery dish holding a grubby sliver of soap which might have started its life pink. No bath, or shower, no natural light, and it was bitterly cold.

'Good God, Adam. This is beyond appalling.'

From a hook behind the door, a towel hung limply. It may once have been white, but was now grey and moist and smelled musty. The ugly black stain growing up the wall in one corner of the room exactly matched the one on the ceiling. Rampant mould.

Sickened by what she had seen, she closed the door on it all and went back into the kitchen.

Her watch told her it was already ten minutes past noon. She had to leave before the workmen stopped for lunch at twelve thirty, or she might be spotted.

She found a piece of paper and a pencil in her bag and began to write a note to Adam. She would let him know it was she who had tended to his dirty dishes, tidied his bed and stoked his fire. No sooner had she written 'Dear Adam,' than the door swung open and she looked up to see the man himself silhouetted in the doorway.

'Well, well, well, trespassing again I see.'

He waited for Finn to amble in before he kicked the door closed with his foot.

'You shouldn't leave your door unlocked,' she said.

He dumped a bag from the local supermarket on the table. 'I've nothing left worth stealing.'

'What's that?'

'Just a wee bit of shopping.'

'Why did you bring it here? You should have taken it to the cottage.'

'I still have two days left.'

She looked into the bag at his sparse groceries - potatoes, carrots, tins of soup, butter, cheese, a packet of biscuits and a small jar of coffee.

He pointed at the pile of clean crockery. 'Did you do this?'

'No,' she said glibly. 'It must have been the washing up pixies.'

He narrowed his eyes at her. 'What else have you been up to? Did you have a good snoop around? Have you been nosing in my stuff?'

'I wasn't snooping. I just tidied up a bit and poked the fire. It's cold in here. I made the bed and put the toilet seat down, which is disgusting by the way. I was just about to leave. I was writing you a note, see.' She held up the paper.

'What were you going to say?'

'Just that I was here and I missed seeing you.'

'Is that all?'

'That's all there was to tell. I should be going now before the men stop for lunch.'

'You're too late.'

'What?' She looked at her watch again. It still said ten past twelve.

'As I drove past I saw your Tom sitting on the grass out there, eating his sandwiches,' he said. 'You'll not get past him without being seen. You're stuck here for the duration. I'll put the kettle on; you can make us some tea while we wait.'

He pushed down the switch on the kettle – nothing happened. The orange indicator light did not come on. He pushed it again. Nothing. He flicked the light switch on the wall by the door. The bulb did not so much as glimmer.

'Bastards!'

'What's the matter?'

'They've cut off the electric.'

'They can't have. I just used the kettle to wash up, it was fine.' She tried the switch for herself. 'Maybe a fuse has blown. Where's the fuse box?' She looked around the walls for it.

'It's upstairs,' he said. 'But you can't get to it.'

'Why?'

'They've blocked off the backstairs route. Besides, if it were a fuse, the lights would still work, they're on a different circuit. The whole lot's been shut off deliberately.'

'They can't do that?'

'Of course they can, that's why they've done it. It's called power play.'

'Go and ask them to put it back on.'

'They won't. It's all part of the plan to force me out.'

'Well, if you won't then I will.' She strode towards the door, her anger making her forget the fact she wasn't supposed to be there.

He seized her by the elbow. 'You will not. You'll leave it.'

'But it's harassment, Adam, it's not fair. You've already agreed to go when they said. There must be something you can do.'

'There is.' He poured water into a pan, banged it down on the stove and lit the gas. 'They can't cut this off.'

No sooner had they settled into the armchairs in front of the fire when there came a pounding on the door. Adam got up and glanced through the window.

'It's the big man himself, Paterson. Go into the bedroom and wait there. I'll get rid of him.'

She scooped up Archie and carried him into Adam's bedroom, closing the door behind them. She pressed her ear to the wood, and through it could hear the two men talking. The words were muffled and indistinct, but the volume and tone told her that a frank exchange of views was taking place, and both were getting angry. She then heard the heavy outer door slam and Adam's booted footsteps cross the slate floor. She stood back from the door as it opened.

'You can come out now, he's gone.'

'What did he want?'

'It seems,' he said, waving a sheet of paper, 'that they won't wait any longer for me to move out. I'm being evicted.'

'When?'

'Now. Today.'

She snatched the paper from him and examined it. 'You said you had two more days.'

He took the paper back. 'They changed their mind. They now claim it's too dangerous for me to stay and if anything happens... They turned off the power to show me they mean business.' He screwed the eviction notice into a tight ball. 'I said I would go at the end of the week and I will not be pushed.'

Linda sat on the bed. 'Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. But maybe it is for the best. You can't live like this any more. You have no electricity and no hot water. You have nowhere to wash properly and nothing to eat—'

'So you were snooping?'

She lifted the eiderdown and laid her hand on the bed sheet. 'This bed is damp, Adam. You really cannot stay here a minute longer.'

He threw the balled paper against the wall. 'I've put up with it for over two years already. A couple more days won't do any harm.'

'Yes it will. I'm being deadly serious, Adam, so stop being so bloody obstinate. You have to move into the cottage immediately. I know it's not finished, but anywhere is better than here. If you stay here, you'll get pneumonia. You know you already have a cough.'

'Well if *you* insist!' he retorted bitterly.

She rose quickly to her feet. 'There's no need for that attitude, Adam. I just want what's best for you, but if you are so blinded by your own stubbornness...you can stew in your own juice.'

She strode towards the door. Adam's arm across the doorway barred her way.

'Don't go,' he said. From the expression on his face anyone would have thought the weight of the whole world had suddenly landed on his shoulders.

'I'm sorry, Linda. You are right of course, absolutely and totally right and I'm being a fecking awkward idiot. I'm just...I'm just so angry at what my circumstances have come to. I hate being out of control of my own life

and I don't always think straight. It's not your fault. I shouldn't take it out on you.'

She put her hand on his arm. 'I want you to understand that I'm worried about you, sweetheart, that's all. I'm trying to help.'

'I know you are and I appreciate it. I really, really do.' He sat dejectedly on the bed and it creaked under his weight. 'I'll move my stuff into the cottage tomorrow.'

'No you won't. There's no time like the present. There's plenty of daylight left, you'll do it today. I'll help you if you want, once I can get out of here.'

Back in the kitchen, they repacked the groceries and Linda made him promise to throw out the mouldy bread, the fuzzy jam and the cold stew. They sat by the fire and drank tea until noises upstairs indicated the builders had returned to work.

She slipped out of the cellar door unseen. With Archie tucked under her arm and using the shrubbery for cover, she reached the bend in the road and safety.

Walking at a brisk pace, she was home in less than half an hour, and at Adam's cottage, thirty minutes later.

Chapter 15

She drew up her Volvo estate car alongside Adam's tatty Land Rover. The open back of the vehicle had been loaded with some of the crates and boxes from the Castle kitchen and he was in the process of hauling a large wooden box towards its open tailgate. He gripped the bottom of the box and rested it against his body, adjusting his hands to balance the weight as he carried it into the house, edging through the doorway with inches to spare, soon to find that carrying a heavy box was one thing, putting it down quite another.

'Steady, let me help,' Linda said, taking hold of the other side of the crate. 'You'll hurt your back.' Together they lowered it to the ground.

'How on earth did you get these in the back of the Land Rover? They weigh a ton?'

Adam sniffed. 'Paterson assigned a willing helper.'

'That was kind of him.'

'Kindness had nothing to do with it.' He picked a splinter of wood out of his finger and sucked at it.

'So, what have you got in here that feels like lead weights?' she said, brushing dust off her hands.

He lifted the lid on the box and she peered inside. 'Books!' she exclaimed. There were already four similar crates in the room, and several smaller cardboard boxes. 'The same?' she said, pointing to them. He nodded.

'How many books?'

'At last count - a thousand and eighty.'

'And how many crates?'

He scratched his head thoughtfully. 'In all...counting the ones in the garage, the ones you didn't see...twenty six.'

'Jesus Christ, Adam!'

'The Castle had an extensive library in its day. My great-great-grandfather loved books. He couldn't get

enough of them. He bought them by the yard. There were thousands of them and I had to let the majority of them go, but I kept a few - for sentimental value.'

She plucked a battered tome from the crate. The cover appeared to be in reasonably good condition, but the pages were discoloured and fragile, the print all but illegible.

'What are you going to do with them? You haven't got a single bookshelf.' She dropped the book back into the box.

'I don't know yet.' Adam replaced the lid. 'Maybe I can use them to prop up the wonky bed.' The incredulous look on her face prompted the question.

'What?'

'I can't believe you,' she said, shaking her head. 'You don't have a fridge to keep your milk cold, you don't have any hot water to have a decent shave, and you haven't had a proper meal for days...yet the first thing you think to move into your new home is crates and crates of dusty old bloody books.'

Adam ran his hand across his rough face and began to chuckle. 'Aye,' he said, looking at the boxes. 'It's...it's ridiculous isn't it.' His chuckle evolved into a deep throaty laugh, and combined with Linda's, it rang around the empty room. It then became a rasping cough and took his breath away.

He rested his hands on his knees, doubled over, and coughed until he had to gasp for air. Linda put her hand on his shoulder, her mirth banished and replaced with concern. Finally the coughing fit ceased.

'Are you alright, sweetheart?'

Adam straightened up, his face red and engorged, a sheen of sweat on his brow. 'It's nothing,' he said, panting. 'It's just a tickle. Too much dust.'

'That's rubbish and you know it. Have you seen a doctor?'

'No need.'

He sat on the bottom step of the stairs to take a few moments to catch his breath. By the time Linda fetched

him a mug of water his face had returned to its normal colour.

'Here drink this.'

He took a few short sips to lubricate his throat.

'Thanks. I'm okay now.'

She squatted before him, her hands on his knees, and looked directly into his eyes. 'You really should see a doctor. I thought you were going to hack up a lung.'

He sipped at the water. 'I'll go later.'

'No, go now, today.'

'It's too late for an appointment today.'

'Tomorrow then?'

'We'll see.'

'And I want you to promise me solemnly that you will never spend another night in that horrible damp place. Not one more night.' Her hands gripped his wrists strongly. 'Promise me, Adam, please, that you'll sleep here in future...give me your word.'

He searched her eyes, and in them saw real anxiety and alarm, and relented.

'I give you my word,' he said, took another sip of the water and gave her the mug back. 'Now...can we get back to work?'

They unloaded the remaining crates and boxes from the Land Rover, and struggling under their weight, got them up the stairs and stacked in the spare bedroom.

'Maybe you could build an extension,' she said. 'You could start up your own library.'

They arranged three boxes in the living room, making temporary seats and a table for their tea break.

Adam returned to the Castle twice more to collect more crates and by mid afternoon both of them had aching legs and backs.

'I have to go,' Linda said, arching her back and stretching. 'It's five o'clock already.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure it's five o'clock.'

'I meant are you sure you have to go?'

'I'm afraid so. But if my legs still work and I can stand up straight, I'll come by and help you some more tomorrow.'

'I'll be here. Thanks for your help...and your company.'

'It was my pleasure to give you both.'

He escorted her to the front door. 'Will you do me a favour before you go?'

'If I can. What is it?'

'Could you give this sorry old, cold body a hug? It should keep me going until tomorrow.'

At ten o'clock on the morning of the next day, Linda sat in her car, thumbing through a magazine and listening to the radio, waiting for Adam to arrive at the cottage. He bounced along the road with some more of his belongings precariously stacked in the open back of the Land Rover.

She greeted him with a hug of encouragement and two bags of groceries. Before unpacking them, she ran upstairs to check whether he had told her the truth about having stayed the night at the cottage. Convinced he had, she helped him unload a couple of cardboard boxes marked 'Kitchen', the disassembled brass bedstead, the saggy old mattress and a pair of well stuffed black bags.

In a concerted effort, they manoeuvred the bed frame up the stairs and into the main bedroom, where they puzzled over how to reassemble it. It took more than an hour to put it back together.

They took time to have lunch before resuming their labours.

'Keep this mattress,' she said, patting the newer of the two. 'It seems to be dry. That other one smells mouldy. Take it to the dump and get shut of it.' They heaved the good mattress onto the bed and Adam emptied a black bag of bed linen onto it. Linda examined the sheets, holding them up to the light. They were discoloured and threadbare, almost worn through in places.

'Good grief! You can take this lot as well,' she said, bundling them back in the bag. She put her nose to the pillows and grimaced. 'Urgh...and these.'

'I'll have nothing left,' he complained.

She pulled at the front of his sweater. 'Come with me.'

He followed her down to her car, from the cavernous rear of which she handed him a large plastic box. She took another for herself.

They put the boxes on the bed and she removed the lids.

'It's good job I had these isn't it?'

From the first box she unpacked a set of blue cotton bed sheets, neatly ironed and folded, a duvet cover, matching pillowcases, and a pair of squashed pillows which slowly re-plumped themselves as they filled with air. From the second she took out a set of blue and white striped towels and a double sized duvet, rolled into a tight cylinder.

'These are my spares,' she said. 'You can have them.'

She trotted down the stairs to her car again, returning with a large carrier bag. 'I brought you these too.'

Adam eyed the bag with suspicion. 'What's in there?'

'Some things I thought you might need. Have a look.'

He opened the bag and pulled out a sweater, cable-knit in grey-green wool.

'That tatty old one you've got is full of holes and stinks like a sewer,' she said. 'Bin it. It's a positive health hazard.'

He frowned at her. 'I like that sweater. I've had it so long, we've both got the same DNA.' He folded the sweater and stuffed it back in the bag. 'I'm not a charity case, Linda. So don't treat me like one. I don't need your cast offs or your spares.'

She pulled the sweater out again. 'Don't get stroppy with me. And it's not a cast off, it was my Dad's. You should get plenty of wear out of it. That stinky horrible thing you've been wearing is not even fit for the ragbag.' She thrust it back into his hands. 'You could at least try it on.'

He sighed resignation and held it up to himself to gauge its size before pulling it over his head, surprised to find it a comfortable fit.

'I sorted through Dad's clothes after he died and kept some aside because...well because they were too good to throw out,' she explained. 'They've been sitting in the bottom of my wardrobe ever since. It would be a waste not to use them. It's not too bad, is it?'

'No, it's fine. Thank you.' He kissed her gently on her cheek. 'And I'm sorry about your father.'

'You're welcome. There's a couple of shirts in there too, but I draw the line at underwear. You're on your own there.'

He gave a short, sharp laugh. 'You're really looking after me, aren't you?'

'You're a man. Somebody has to.'

They wrestled with the duvet and made up the bed. When they stood back to admire their efforts, she noticed Adam breathing deeply and looking a little flushed. He pulled off the sweater, making his hair stand on end. He tidied it down with his fingers.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'I'm fine.'

'You seem a little out of breath again.'

He rubbed a hand over his chest. 'I'm not quite as fit as I like to think I am.'

'Did you ring the doctor?'

'No. I forgot. I'll do it later today.'

'Do you want to rest for a bit?'

'Aye, just for a minute.'

They lay quietly side by side on the bed. After a while not speaking, Linda asked, 'Are you okay now, or do you want to wait a bit longer?'

He pulled her over until she was lying on top of him. 'No,' he said, 'I'm all better now. In actual fact, I was thinking about getting a wee bit more active.'

'Oh?'

'It's a new house, a new room and a new bed. I think they deserve to be christened...don't you?'

'Now?'

'Why not?'

Linda checked her watch, now wound and working correctly again. 'Okay, if you're feeling up to it, but just a quickie mind...purely for ceremonial purposes.'

'That'll do for me,' he said, unbuttoning her shirt and slipping his hand inside.

Chapter 16

Over the next few days, Linda helped Adam move the rest of his things into the cottage, including the old fireside armchairs. There was just enough room in the kitchen for the table and four of the chairs. Gradually, between them, they made the place more homely. She helped him paint the walls and assemble the kitchen units, bought him curtains and a set of crockery from the charity shop, and also brought him a radio.

'Play it in the background,' she said. 'It'll keep you company when it gets too quiet.'

Despite all his new home comforts, Adam stubbornly refused to stay away from the Castle completely. His ties to the place were too strong and he was loathed to leave it.

Although it was early summer and the weather warmer, the cellar remained damp and chilly. Every day he let himself in, lit the fire and sat before it on one of the pine chairs he'd had to leave behind, Finn lying at his feet on one of the old rag rugs.

One morning, he arrived at the Castle to find his access barred. While he had been enjoying the previous afternoon in bed with Linda, a brand new, very substantial padlock had been attached the cellar door, fastening it securely against the stonework. In an utterly futile gesture, he took hold of the lock and tugged at it, taking the measure of its strength.

There was no way he could shift it with his hands alone.

He looked around for something he could use to prise the lock from its mountings. A crowbar or a stout piece of wood might do the job. None was immediately evident, but in his search, he noticed the garage door standing ajar.

He approached it cautiously, fearful his BMW stored within had been vandalised or worse, stolen. The car

was still there and at first glance, seemed undamaged. Thrown carelessly on the floor beside it were the last two bin bags of his meagre belongings, and tucked under the right windscreen wiper, a piece of torn card. On it, scrawled in a heavy hand, were the words;

Last warning - move it or lose it, Strachan!

A bubble of temper rose, and flared into a rage. He stormed out into the yard, yelling.

'PATERSON!'

The boom of his voice bounced and echoed off the walls, resounding around the courtyard. He yelled again. and from the ground, picked up a piece of fallen masonry. With the full force of his anger behind it, he launched the rock towards the nearest window, not caring whether there should be anyone on the other side.

Several panes of glass shattered, sending myriad potentially deadly shards flying into the room beyond. The effort of his action brought on a bout of coughing, doubling him over.

Within moments, the object of his fury, Bill Paterson the site overseer, stormed around the side of the building, outraged at the wanton vandalism.

'You've been warned enough times, Strachan,' he roared. 'You have no rights to be here any more. This is no longer your property. So take your stuff and get lost.'

'My family have been here for ten generations,' Adam rejoined, his anger unabated.

'I don't care,' said Paterson. 'Get your stuff, your motor and yourself together, and get off this property.'

Adam picked up another piece of stone.

'Go ahead,' taunted Paterson, pulling out his mobile phone and flipping it open. 'And I'll have the *polis* onto you for trespassing and criminal damage.'

'Not if I shove both barrels of my shotgun to the back of your throat first, you sanctimonious bastard!'

Paterson took a menacing step toward Adam. 'Are you threatening me, *Mister* Strachan? 'Cause if you are, I'll just add it to the list...'

He commenced to dialling.

'Last chance, Strachan. One more number and the *polis* deal with you. Your choice.'

Thoughts ran through Adam's mind at lightning speed. Arrested, charged, fined, he would almost certainly have his gun licence withdrawn. He could even go to prison for threatening Paterson. The incident might get in the press and then his name would be mud. Worst of all, if Linda perceived him to be a violent lunatic she might stay away from him.

He dropped the rock to the ground and put up his hands in capitulation.

'Wise choice,' said Paterson.

Adam threw his belongings into the back of the BMW and drove to the cottage. He had to walk the mile and a half back through the wood to collect his Land Rover.

Linda stopped by the cottage to have lunch with Adam. She found him sitting hunched at the kitchen table, his features darkened by a deep scowl. He did not respond to her greeting kiss.

'What's wrong?'

He turned his eyes onto her, flint hard and cold.

'They put a padlock on the Castle door,' he uttered dully. 'I can't get in any more.'

She unpacked supermarket-bought sandwiches onto plates. 'Oh no, sweetheart, when?'

'Yesterday, while we were here upstairs having fun, while my attention was diverted elsewhere.'

'Hmmm.'

'You don't sound surprised. Did you know they were going to do it?'

'How could I possibly have known?' She licked mayonnaise off her fingers, aware of his eyes still on her. 'Just a minute, are you saying you think Tom might have had something to do with it?'

His accusatory gaze did not waver. 'Did he? Did you tell him to?'

'What? No! Of course not. Why would I—'

'To get your own way—'

'Don't be so ridiculous! And if Tom did do it, it would have been because Paterson told him to. He wouldn't make that decision by himself. He's just a joiner.'

Having no other outlet for it, he turned his temper on her. 'I've been locked out of my own fucking home, Linda,' he barked. 'Evicted by force and locked OUT! Do you have the slightest inkling how that feels?'

He leapt to his feet, passed through the doorway and began to march stiffly around the living room.

She followed him and stood in his way, her hands out.

'Stop, Adam. Stand still and listen to me.' He stood, breathing heavily and she caressed his arms in an attempt to soothe him.

'It's not yours any more, Adam, you have to accept it,' she said gently. 'This is your home now.'

He pointed aggressively in the general direction of the Castle, his jaw set tight with resentment, chin creased.

'I don't want to live here. I want to live there. That house has been my home my whole life. You have no idea...what it means to...to lose everything.' His voice cracked as he struggled to speak and Linda saw tears standing in his eyes. 'That bastard Paterson threatened to have me arrested if I didn't leave. He threw my stuff out like it was so much rubbish...' His voice trailed off and he dropped into the armchair, his face covered by his hands.

She sat on the chair arm and stroked her hand comfortingly over the back of his shoulders.

'I'm so sorry, my love.' She kissed the back of his neck.

His shoulders slumped under her hand and began to shake and she cradled his head against her, her cheek resting on his hair, to hold him while his bitter tears of frustration and anger flowed thick and fast and unstoppable.

Adam's emotional outburst left him in need of comfort and solace. Linda willingly offered him both, and herself, to ease his angst. His failure to achieve erection and be able to bring either himself or Linda to a satisfying

climax simply compounded his misery. She tried her best to console him.

'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'Don't worry about it. You're under a lot of stress. It's to be expected.'

Her words, well-meaning though they were, did nothing to make him feel better.

The afternoon sun streamed through the open window and onto the couple as they lay in bed. His enmity had been exorcised somewhat, only to be replaced by new feelings of futility and worthlessness. He slid out from under Linda's arm and pulled on his pants.

'Where are you going?'

He reached for his shirt. 'Nowhere. I'll be back in a minute.'

'Are you alright?'

'I'm fine.'

She stretched out on the bed and allowed the sun's rays to warm her as she waited for him to return.

After fifteen minutes, she dressed and went to find him, in the kitchen, dressed and leaning against the worktop, an open bottle of whisky behind him on the counter, a glass in his hand.

'Do you want some?' he said when he saw her looking at it.

'No thanks. Do you think you should?'

'It might make the problems go away, at least until tomorrow.'

He poured another small measure of the whisky and scraped out a chair from the table. He sat down and rubbed his brow vigorously.

'What am I going to do, Linda? My life has turned into a pile of shit, and I don't know where I'm going or what to do. I've been evicted from my home and threatened with arrest if I show my face there again. I'm scraping by on a pittance of an income and...now I've let you down.'

'What do you mean?'

'I can't make love to you any more.'

'It's not any more, darling, it's just once, and like I said, it doesn't matter. I understand.'

'What if it happens again?'

'It won't, and if it does, we'll deal with it.'

He took a swig from the glass and rubbed his eyes.

'Oh, God. Could this day possibly get any worse?'

She took the glass from him and sipped at the liquid within. 'I'm afraid so, sweetheart. I'm going to have to go.'

He took hold of her hand. 'Don't go. Stay with me. Today of all days, I need you.'

'Oh, my love, I can't. You know that.' She put her fingers in his hair and stroked through it. 'Please don't be like this. I know things are awful, but I can't stand to see you so upset.'

He took the glass back. 'I don't know how else I'm supposed to feel. Everything is just so...grey. Pointlessly, hopelessly grey.'

She looked past him and out of the window, at the vehicles parked outside.

'If you're short of money, you could always sell the BMW,' she said. 'It must be worth something and you said yourself, it's an extravagance you don't really need.'

He sighed. 'And when that money's gone, where do I get the rest? There's so much to do here and I might want to eat sometime.'

'You get a job like everyone else, or sign on the dole.'

'I'm not qualified to do anything and I will never sign on. Never. Spare me some dignity.'

'There must be something you are able to do.'

'It's been a full time job running the estate for the last twenty years. I don't know anything else and I'm too old to retrain.'

'Nonsense,' she scoffed. 'You're never too old. Try the supermarket. They always need staff.'

He blew out a sharp, sardonic laugh. 'Can you really see me behind the checkout at the supermarket?' His tone turned sour and mocking. 'Can I help you pack, madam? Do you want savings stamps? Have you tried our special two for one offer on hedgehog flavour kitty chunks? Do have a nice day!'

Linda shrugged. 'It will pay the bills—'

'Pah!' He took another drink. Conversation over.

She consulted her wristwatch. 'I have to go. Are you going to be alright?'

She reached out to touch his hand; he moved it out of her reach, sniffed and stared at the glass.

'I'm going to have to be, aren't I?'

'I'll come see you next week.'

He ran his finger around the rim of the glass. 'Why not tomorrow?'

'Because it's Saturday. I always spend the weekend with Tom. We agreed. I can see you on Monday when he's at work?'

He drained his drink. 'Aye, good old Tom and his job.' He refilled the glass. 'I'm busy Monday. I'm having the oil tank filled and the boiler fitted. More expenses I can't afford.'

'Tuesday, then?'

'If you like,' he said, flat and empty.

'Tuesday it is.' She gave him a brief kiss on the cheek. 'Bye, Adam.'

He neither looked at her nor responded to her kiss, only mumbled dully. 'Aye. Cheerio.'

He continued to stare into the glass to the sounds of her leaving; the squeak of the front door closing, the slamming of her car door, the starting and revving of the Volvo's engine, her eventual pulling away.

Silence.

Finn nuzzled his master's knee, seeking attention. Adam remained at the table, not moving, barely aware of the dog's presence.

He saw nothing but barrenness ahead, and no way to relieve it, except for Linda's soft hands on his face, her holding him in one of her gentle, loving hugs, her pressing her soft lips on his, and for her to whispering words of encouragement in his ear.

Now, more than ever, he needed her, to hold him up and infuse him with some of her sensibilities, to batter down and stamp on the remnants of an pretentiousness,

she would call it snobbery, but she had gone away, gone home to her husband and he had to deal with it on his own.

Never before had he felt so utterly alone and useless, and for the first time in his life, truly scared.

No, not just scared, terrified.

All of a sudden he felt it, a tide of fear and panic, rushing at him, picking up bitterness and resentment along the way, presenting him with an indomitable maelstrom of every negative emotion. He fought hard, biting down on a trembling lip, eyes filled to overflowing. And then the wave swept over him, beating him into submission, and he folded his arms onto the table, dropped his head onto them - and wept openly.

Chapter 17

Adam's fall into melancholy disturbed Linda deeply. In bed, allowing Tom his customary Saturday morning quickie, her thoughts wandered back to the previous day and Adam's expression of pure desolation as he sat clasping his whisky glass, and her heart ached for him.

Tom did not appear to notice her responses to his ardent lovemaking were not quite as enthusiastic as usual, but it didn't stop him being happy with his own performance and resultant orgasm.

A late breakfast followed, and a trip to the supermarket to cater for their evening entertaining friends for dinner. After lunch, Tom stayed out of her way, firstly by showing his support for the local junior football team on the village green, closely followed by a pint at the pub with the players' dads.

Saturday night dragged interminably. Linda attended to her guests with good grace, a smile and rapt attention, all forced. Her thoughts were with her lover, alone and miserable in his cottage.

On Sunday morning, in another one of his long held rituals, Tom fetched her breakfast in bed and they watched the shopping channel on TV while perusing the papers and colour supplements.

An afternoon visit to the garden centre resulted in the spontaneous purchase of several new rose bushes and their subsequent planting in the front garden, after which the couple, sweaty and dirty, shared a hot bubble bath.

A supper of thickly cheesed, deep-pan pizza with pepperoni followed, washed down with a bottle of red wine, and they soundly rounded off the weekend with a period of languorous sex.

Monday dawned misty and grey. Tom cycled off to work, and Linda spent the whole day alone at home,

tending to her domestic chores. As Adam had made it clear he would not be available that day, she did not take Archie to the Oak Wood. Instead, after checking the whereabouts of the cows, they walked their old route down on the riverbank.

She waited for Tom to settle at work on Tuesday morning before driving to Adam's home. The Land Rover occupied its space, but the BMW was missing. On the front door of the cottage, she noticed a piece of paper stuck firmly to it with a piece of Selotape.

"L.

Had to go out. Following your advice re BMW. Sorry for being such an arse before. Forgive me. See you tomorrow pm, please?

A."

She detached the paper from the door and returned to her car.

The next afternoon, she retraced her route down the potholed track toward the cottage. No vehicles were visible, and at first she assumed Adam to be out again, but when she saw smoke curling from the chimney, it gave her hope someone was, or had been, at home.

She parked, and knocked lightly on the front door. Receiving no answer, she cautiously tried the handle; unlocked. With a push and a creak, the door opened.

'Adam! Are you here?' she called out. Again she received no reply, but could hear voices.

Finn, in his usual place in his basket by the fire, greeted her presence with a thudding wag of his tail. 'Hello, Finn,' she said, scratching the dog's head. 'Where's Adam, eh?'

Picking her way past the crates of books still stacked in the living room, she made her way into the kitchen. The rear door stood propped open. On hearing the voices more clearly, she realised one of them was coming from the radio, the other wasn't.

She went outside and found Adam, dressed in dirty blue overalls, with his head buried under the hood of the Land Rover, making adjustments to the engine. He appeared to be talking to it, and for the first time she heard his pet name for the vehicle - 'Bessie'.

'Adam?' she said quietly, wanting to attract his attention but not startle him. He swivelled his head toward the sound of her voice, a ratchet spanner clamped between his teeth. 'Mmmnna?'

She pushed her hands into the pockets of her jacket. 'Who else were you expecting?'

He spat the spanner out into his hand. 'Erm...no-one. I didn't think you'd...' The spanner slipped from his hand and clanged into the engine. 'Ach, bugger it,' he muttered as he searched for it.

'You're busy and I'm interrupting,' she said, and half turned to leave. 'I can come back another time.'

'No, please stay,' he said, his voice muffled by the depths of the engine. 'I'll only be a minute.' He grunted and strained as he reached into the motor. 'Come here, ye mockitt bastard,' he cursed. Eventually he retrieved the missing tool with a satisfied, 'Gotcha!' He came out from under the bonnet of the vehicle, dropped the spanner into the toolbox, and wiped his oily hands on an equally oily rag.

Linda inclined her head towards his faithful vehicle. 'Is she broken?'

'No. I'm just doing a wee bit of maintenance. The old girl needs a little tender loving care now and again.'

'Don't we all?'

He threw the rag on top of the toolbox. 'I'm done now, I'm all yours.' He excused himself and she stepped aside to let him pass, not wanting any of the grime on his overalls to transfer onto her coat. She followed him into the kitchen.

At the sink, he removed the lid from a grimy tin and scooped out a handful of a green jelly-like substance. He rubbed it into his hands, squishing it between his fingers. As it dissolved the grease it turned a dirty grey-

green colour. He looked at his messy hands, and then at the tap.

'Bugger.' He turned to Linda. 'Would you mind? I don't want to get grease on the taps.'

A gentle *whoomph* behind her accompanied the flow from the hot water tap, and she turned to see the new boiler on the wall.

'Proper heat and hot water at last,' she said. 'Fabulous.'

She dripped detergent into his cupped hands and he massaged it into foam as she took off her coat and folded it over the back of a chair. Patiently she watched and waited as he scrubbed his hands in the steaming stream, removing the grime and oil mixture, and dried himself on a towel. He stripped off his overalls, although he was still not completely clean.

'You missed a bit,' she said. 'Stand still.'

She wiped an oily smudge from his forehead with a piece of kitchen towel. 'That's better.'

After disposing of the soiled paper in the trash, she put her hand in her coat pocket and pulled out the note he had left for her, holding it up between two fingers for him to see.

'So that's where it got too,' he said. 'I saw it was gone. I thought it might have blown away.'

She unfolded it dramatically and cleared her throat. 'It says something on here about someone being an arse. Do you have any idea who that could be referring to...at all?'

'Does it? Then I were to hazard a guess, I would say, me. Coffee?'

'Yes please.'

He switched on the kettle and put coffee powder into two mugs.

'I worried about you all weekend,' she said. 'I couldn't stop thinking about you and how sad you were. Are you feeling better?'

He gave her an encouraging smile. 'Aye, I am. I got a bit low, very low, but I let myself have a wee cry and got it all out of my system and I'm okay again.'

She put her arms around his neck to hug him. 'Oh no, sweetheart, you mustn't cry.' She touched her lips to his cheek. 'I don't ever want you to have to cry.'

'I think it did me some good,' he said. 'It cleared y head, made me think things over.'

He unhooked her hands from around his neck and held them in front of him. 'I didn't think you'd bother to come back after the way I behaved...the way I let you down.'

'You didn't let me down—'

'Yes I did—'

'No, darling, you were upset. You've had a lot to deal with all at once, probably too much. I should have been more understanding, more supportive. I'm the one who's sorry. I shouldn't have left you.'

His head dropped. 'It was no excuse for rudeness. Forgive me.'

She put her hand against his cheek. 'It's already forgotten.'

He took a new carton of milk from the fridge and fiddled with the cap. Defeated by the foil seal, he passed the carton over to Linda.

'Women's work,' he said.

She rolled her eyes, peeled the seal open with ease, and out of habit, sniffed at the milk. Satisfied with its freshness, she handed it back.

She carried her coffee through to the bay window, and looked out at where her car stood alone in the double parking space.

'What did you mean, you were following my advice about the BMW?' she said.

Adam stood behind her, looking over her shoulder. 'I sold it like you told me to.'

'I didn't tell you to do anything!' she retorted. 'It was just a suggestion. You didn't have to do it. Selling you watch was one thing, getting rid of your car is quite another.'

'I didn't think you'd noticed the watch,' he said, pulling the cheap timepiece from his pocket and fastening it around his wrist. 'I couldn't really afford the

car anyway and like you said, I didn't really need it. It was all for show. Once upon a time, we Strachans might have had an image to maintain, but it doesn't matter now. It was just an expensive affectation.'

'Did you get a good price?'

He sniffed. 'Not bad, all things considered. Enough to keep me going for a few months...so long as I don't eat, or put the lights on...but I did squander a few pounds on that...' He pointed to a small TV in the corner of the room. 'It's second hand, but it works okay.'

'Welcome to the twenty first century,' she said with a smile.

Adam suddenly fell into a paroxysm of coughing and unable to put his cup down, spilled hot coffee over himself.

Linda took his mug from him and put it out of harm's way on the windowsill.

His coughing continued until he was out of breath, eyes bulging and watering, and red in the face.

'Damn and blast it,' he choked, wiping his wet hand down the leg of his trousers.

'Your cough is getting worse, Adam.'

Slowly, he regained his breath and his normal colouration, and rubbed at his chest. 'It's just an irritation,' he said hoarsely, suppressing more coughing. 'It's gone now. I'm good.'

'You're no such thing and you've burned yourself?'

She examined the area of skin on his hand, already turning bright pink, dragged him by a shirt sleeve to the kitchen sink, turned on the cold tap and plunged his hand under the flow. After a few minutes, she patted his hand dry with a clean towel and inspected it again.

'Looks worse than it is. Does it hurt?'

'It stings a wee bit.'

'Then I think we might get away with just a little touch of first aid.'

She gently pressed the injured skin to her lips, as if her cool kiss could soothe away the damage and pain. At her tender, caring touch, Adam felt the need to cup her

chin and lift her mouth to his and help himself to a long, slow kiss.

She took his still slightly flushed face in her hands.

'Are you sure you're feeling alright? You're a little warm.'

'That's your fault, touching and kissing a bloke like you do. Getting him all hot and bothered.'

'Would the bloke like me to stop and let him cool off a bit?'

'God, no...the bloke wants you to do it again.'

They made love in his bed, and in complete contrast to the previous occasion, it was vigorous and strong and they reached climaxes satisfying to them both. Fulfilled, they lay quietly, enclosed in each other's arms. With her head on his bare chest, she could hear a faint, unusual sound, akin to small bubbles being blown through a straw.

His skin still felt warmer than usual under her cheek, which she put down to his state of exhilaration at their recent exertions.

'Have you ever compared Tom and me?'

The unexpected question took Linda aback.

'I'm not quite sure I want to answer that. It seems rather tasteless of you to ask.'

'Humour me. I'm just curious. Do you judge us against each other?'

'You mean, sexually?'

'Aye. You're in a unique position to make comparisons. You make love to two different men, maybe to both in the same day. Don't tell me you don't measure us up against each other. I'm sure you do...in your own mind.'

'What a ridiculous thing to assume. I can tell you straight, I don't. Tom's Tom and you are you. You are poles apart and never the twain shall meet.'

'I can't believe you don't even think about it.'

She rolled over and looked at him keenly. 'I don't because I don't have to. It's not a competition. And speaking of Tom, it's time I was making a move.'

She sat up and put on her brassiere, and he kissed her bare shoulder as he fastened the clasps. She pulled her sweater over her head and he straightened it down her back.

'What would happen if you were late?' he said.

She flicked her hair tidy. 'Nothing much, I don't suppose.'

'Tom wouldn't wonder where you'd been.'

'I don't think so.'

'He wouldn't be suspicious that you might have another man on the go?'

'Probably not. He trusts me to behave myself.'

'Don't you feel bad, breaking his trust?'

'I try not to think about it.'

'Then stay a little longer.'

'No. I have to stick with the routine.'

'Is that what I've become, a routine?'

She pulled up her trousers. 'No, of course not. Why are you being difficult all of a sudden? Stop it.'

'Aye, you run along home to your beloved husband. You take good care of him. We wouldn't want anything to happen to him, would we?'

She twisted around to him, a frown darkening her eyes. 'What do you mean by that?'

He blew air out through his teeth and shook his head. 'Nothing. I just felt like being petty.'

She slipped on her shoes. 'Well don't. It's cruel, I don't like it...and it doesn't suit you.'

He dropped back onto the pillow, his arms folded behind his head. 'Will I see you tomorrow?'

'No,' she said. 'I have things of my own to do tomorrow.'

'What things?'

'Just things.'

'Please yourself,' he said, with more than a hint of sulkiness.

'If you must know, I have to go shopping to feed us,' she said, her annoyance tweaked. 'I have to go to the bank to pay the bills and I have a dental appointment because I like to look after my teeth. It may come as a

surprise to you, but I do have a life outside of either your or Tom's bed.'

He covered his face with his hands and sighed through them. 'Of course you do. I'm sorry. I just miss you so much when you're not here. I think I'm becoming a wee bit envious of anything...or anyone...that keeps you away from me.'

She pulled his hands apart. 'And I miss not being with you, too, but the rest of my life still goes on. I have a husband to take care of, a home to run, shopping to do, bills to pay and teeth to be cleaned.'

'I'm sorry.'

'So you should be.'

'Can I have a kiss before you go?' he said penitently. 'To keep me going 'til I see you again?'

She bent over him, her face close to his. 'You can have two.'

The two kisses were ultimately tender.

'You do know I...I love you, don't you Linda?' he said, quietly.

It was the first time he had admitted his feelings for her, and it made her heart glow. Now she could confess hers.

'I know,' she said, kissing him deeply again. 'And I love you, too, but I still have to go.' She slipped her foot into her sandal. 'And you take care of that hand.'

'It's fine.'

On went the second sandal. 'Did you call the doctor about your cough yet?'

'I forgot. I've been too busy.'

'Do it now.'

'I'll do it tomorrow?'

'Do it now.'

He drew in a breath to argue. She got there first.

'Do. It. Now.'

And after blowing him a farewell kiss, she was gone.

Downstairs, about to close the front door on her way out, she heard him enduring another attack of his hacking cough, and the sound of it filled her with intense misgiving.

Chapter 18

'Hey babe, whatcha doin'?'

Linda, staring idly out of the window at nothing in particular, started when Tom came up behind her and put his hands around her to fondle her breasts.

'Just thinking,' she said.

'What about?'

'Stuff.'

He nuzzled and kissed the crook of her neck. 'You think too much. Women should be mindless drones, subservient to their menfolk, dropping their knickers at the drop of a hat and giving in to their every whim and whimsy.'

'And I'm sure they are, on the planet Zog. Meanwhile, here on Earth...'

'Are you in a mood?'

'No I'm not in a mood.'

'Sounds like you are.'

'I am not in a mood, but keep on talking daft and I soon will be.'

'So what's on your mind?'

'Nothing special, just going over the boring stuff I have to do today.'

'Are you going out?'

'Yep. Shopping; to the bank; and to the dentist. Today is just chocablock full of excitement.'

'I don't know how you cope with it,' he said, and kissed her neck again, before picking up his lunch box and flask and stuffing them into his backpack.

'I'll see you later, chick. Drive carefully.'

'I will. Have a good day.'

She watched him push his cycle up the garden path and through the gate into the lane. With a hop he was astride his bike, and with a wave, away. Once more, she was alone in the house with only her dog for company.

By late afternoon, her chores completed, her errands run and her teeth cleaned, she took Archie for a short walk through the Oak Wood, considering that, as Tom would be finishing work shortly, she would not return home, but would amble down the path through the Wood to meet him. She spotted him pushing his bicycle, and noticed him limping slightly, a pained expression on his face.

When he caught sight of her, the expression vanished and he welcomed her into his arms with a smile and a kiss.

They walked slowly back towards home until they reached a small wooden bench. It was old and somewhat rickety, but it offered respite.

He leaned his bicycle against a tree and dropped down onto the bench. 'Let's sit a while,' he said.

She sat beside him. 'I noticed you were limping a little,' she said. 'Does your leg hurt?'

'Aches a bit.' He pulled up his trouser leg and rubbed his hand over his scar, a dark pink line running over the front of his knee and halfway down his shin.

'You're overdoing it. Maybe you're not ready to be at work full time yet,' she said.

'I'm fine. I'll just rest for a minute. It's been a long day, forever up and down stairs and ladders.'

He leaned against the back of the bench, arms spread wide, eyes closed, face turned to the early evening sun. Linda watched Archie, snuffling about in the undergrowth.

Suddenly the dog stood still and sniffed the air, picking up the scent of something interesting, before vanishing into the foliage to investigate.

Waiting for him to return, she caught a movement among the bushes. Too large to be her dog. Could it be a deer? Or a man? Was someone watching them? She peered hard into the shadows, trying to work out what, or who, could be there.

Click!

Harsh. Metallic. All too familiar.

Her heart froze, horrified eyes fixed on the bushes twenty feet in front of her, from between the leaves of which emerged the unmistakable, side-by-side double barrel of a shotgun.

Adam's gun!

Adam's finger poised over the trigger.

Her husband in mortal danger.

Heart pounding, chest tight, she looked deep into the foliage, searching the dense leaves and shade. She could not make out his face, but knew, if he had Tom in his sights, he could see her also. Her head moved slowly from side to side, her mouth miming a clear and desperate, 'No.'

The gun barrel did not withdraw.

A stronger message was needed. If he wanted to shoot Tom, he would have to go through her first. Would he?

Eyes still on the foliage, she got to her feet and stood in front of Tom. Slowly, deliberately, she turned her back to the weapon, putting herself between her husband and her dangerously armed lover.

For a second she wondered what it might feel like being shot, and sent up a silent prayer for her death to be quick and relatively pain free.

She stretched out trembling hands to help Tom to his feet. 'Come on, let's go home,' she said.

Behind her, the soft rustle of leaves, the snapping of a twig, and Archie reappeared from his investigations.

The couple walked slowly up the path towards their home, Tom leaning heavily on his bicycle. Linda cast a backward glance in the direction of the bushes.

The gun barrel had disappeared.

Twin beams of headlights bounced down the potholed lane to Adam Strachan's cottage, and Linda's Volvo skidded to a halt outside. Engine running, door wide open, Linda abandoned the vehicle and marched stiffly toward the sturdy front door and pounded on it with her fists.

'Adam! I know you're in there!'

She hammered out a continuous staccato of blows.

'Open this door. Right now!'

The door opened, and she came face to face with the focus of her fury.

'You stupid, brainless bastard. How dare you! How dare you threaten my husband?' She pushed her way past him and into the sitting room. 'How could you do such a thing?'

'Come in why don't you?'

'What in the name of sanity do you think you were doing?' She sniffed, the aroma of alcohol evident on him. 'Have you been drinking?'

'What if I have?'

She paced around the room, arms folded across her chest, face flushed, eyes flashing with indignation.

'What the sodding hell is the matter with you, Adam? Have you gone off your trolley? How could you threaten someone with a loaded gun? It was loaded wasn't it...of course it was, it always is? Just what the fuck were you thinking?'

He scratched his chin. 'In truth, something along the lines of, 'If I pull the trigger now, poof, he'll be out of the way, and I'll have you all to myself'.'

His impertinent flippancy, his depraved indifference in light of the seriousness of the situation, only served to inflame her anger and it exploded.

The flat of her palm connected with the side of his face so hard it knocked his teeth together and brought flashes of light into his eyes. He staggered where he stood, shocked, yet resisted raising his hand to his stinging, burning cheek.

'You complete and utter bastard!' she spat. 'If you ever, EVER pull a stunt like that again, I'll make damned sure the police get to know about it and I'll have you locked up. Not only that, I guarantee you will never see or hear from again in your lifetime.'

She poked him hard in the chest with her forefinger for punctuation. 'Do-I-make-myself-perfectly-clear?!'

Without giving him chance to retort, she punched him hard on the front of his shoulder, causing him to rock

back, turned on her heel and stalked from the house, slamming the door behind her.

The car door banged, the engine revved, and through the window he saw the tail lights of the vehicle bobbing angrily away up the track.

Only then did he touch the burning spot on his face.

'I think I might have deserved that,' he said to Finn, who had observed the whole drama from the safety of his basket.

Adam did not see Linda for over a week. He concluded, quite correctly, that she was still furious with him and avoiding him, and began to think her threat of his not being able to see her again to not be an idle one.

It gladdened his heart therefore, when he came upon her sitting atop the parapet of the bridge over the burn. Archie, oblivious to any ill feeling between them, ran to greet his friend.

'I didn't think you were ever going to come back,' Adam said, keeping the breadth of the bridge between them.

She shrugged. 'Archie needed his walk.'

'You could have gone somewhere else.'

'I could, but this is more convenient.'

He nodded slowly. 'It's good to see you.'

'You too.'

She motioned for him to move nearer, to put her hand on his shoulder. 'Have you learned your lesson?'

He hung his head and looked at his boots. 'I think so.'

She lifted his chin to see his eyes. 'Are you alright?'

'I'm fine.'

'You look a little pale.' She put her palm to his face. 'You're warm. How's your cough?'

'It's tolerable. I'm okay. All the better for seeing you.'

She looked into his contrite face. 'I couldn't bear to see you, Adam. You made me very angry indeed. It was an incredibly stupid and dangerous thing you did.'

He dropped his head again. 'I know and I'm sorry.'

'And so you should be. What on earth did you think threatening Tom was going to get you? Is that any way to behave toward someone you claim to love?'

'I do love you, Linda, and I wouldn't have done anything to hurt you. I'd had too much to drink and just wanted to give you a little scare.'

'You certainly succeeded there. You frightened me half to death. Drink *and* guns? You could have killed someone.'

'I know.'

'I should by rights report you to the police.'

'I know. You won't though, will you? They'll take my licence away.'

'No. But if you ever do anything so stupid again, I won't hesitate. No second chances. Understood?'

'Understood.'

Silence.

'You hate me don't you?'

'No, Adam. I couldn't hate you if I tried.'

'I'd understand if you do and you don't ever want to see me again. I take all the blame. I was stupid and irresponsible and I'm sorry I upset you.'

'I don't hate you,' she said, palm against his cheek. 'But I don't like seeing that side of you. It's not nice. It's scary.'

'What side?'

'Green-eyed jealousy.'

'Is that what it is?'

Silence.

'I'm sorry I slapped you,' she said, stroking the assaulted area. 'I hope it didn't hurt too much.'

'I'm sure I'll get the feeling back in it soon. It was a fair old belt you gave me.'

'Quite restrained under the circumstances, I thought.'

'Hell fire, I'd hate to see you when you're really mad.'

'Let's hope you never do.' She hopped down from her stone seat and brushed dust from the seat of her pants. 'Enough apologising for one day. Let's walk.'

They took the path leading deep into the Oak Wood, staying out of view of the Castle where Tom was at

work. The windows of the building were covered with sheets of blue polythene, and the chances of being seen were slim, but it was a chance nonetheless.

Now and then, the breeze carried the sound of the builders' power tools to their ears, interrupting their peace.

'What a racket,' she said. 'You must be glad you're not living there now.'

Adam removed his cap and scratched his head. 'Aye, I suppose. The whole building will be vibrating from eaves to foundations? Let's hope it can take the strain. There's always the chance it could collapse into a four hundred year old pile of rubble.'

'Tom says they've gutted the place and the rebuilding is about to start. I feel really badly you've had to see it and I'm sorry Tom has had to be part of it.'

He flapped his cap back on. 'I thought you said enough apologies for one day?'

She linked arms with him and rested her head against his arm. 'So I did.'

They reached a spot by the burn where the bank sloped easily. Adam, a little short of breath, rasped out a cough.

'Do you want to sit a while?' she said.

'Aye. That path seems a little steeper today.'

He took off his stock coat and placed it waterproof side down on the grass. They sat on the coat, his arm around her shoulders, her leaning against him. Archie crept in between them.

Adam wound his fingers into Linda's soft auburn hair and she turned her face to him, to look into his soft grey eyes. They appeared to be not quite as clear as usual, seeming...foggy, clouded with fatigue.

'Am I forgiven?' he said.

'For what?'

'For being the biggest berk that ever lived? For giving you cause to be so upset with me?'

She removed his cap to see his weather worn features fully, cradled his face in her hands and gently kissed him.

'What do you think?'

The kiss turned to an embrace, and Archie, squashed between them, whimpered and wriggled his escape. The couple lay back on the coat and the little dog crept away to a safe distance, settled down with his chin on his paws, to wait.

'Why does time have to go so quickly?' she said. 'I have to meet Tom. He'll be expecting me.'

Adam threw his coat over his arm and the couple made their way back to the main path.

'Wait here,' she said, bringing them to a halt. 'Just in case he's early.'

They exchanged brief goodbye kisses and Adam waited as instructed, until she, followed closely by Archie, disappeared from sight. He didn't follow her. He didn't want to see her embracing her husband, or kissing him with the same lips which, just minutes ago, had given him so much pleasure.

He turned and retraced his steps back to the banks of the burn.

Chapter 19

'Have you come across the nutter in the woods lately?' said Tom, as he and Linda walked home from his work. 'The former lord of the manor now no better than the rest of us 'umble mortals.'

'You're so horrible, Tom. Mr Strachan's not a nutter, he's very nice. And he's never been a lord.'

'Ah, it's *Mister* Strachan now is it?' he said. 'How well do you know this chap and do I need to rearrange his features?'

She played along with his curiosity. Divulging the bare minimum of information would stop him from becoming suspicious.

'We introduced ourselves on a walk a few weeks ago...and no, there is no need for you to throw your weight around.'

'How often have you seen him?'

'Once or twice. He knows all about trees and plants and things. He showed me a red kite once and he knows where there are badgers.'

'You never mentioned it.'

'I didn't think you'd be interested.'

'I'd be careful of him if I were you. By all accounts he's a bit bonkers.'

'Why?'

'You know he threatened Bill Paterson? He chucked a brick through a window at the Castle. Bill went to throw him off the property and Strachan threatened to ram his gun in his mouth and blow his head off.'

Linda knew he was exaggerating of course, but although Adam's altercation with Tom's boss had been unfortunate, she felt she had to defend his recklessness nonetheless.

'It must have been very tough for him, being evicted and all. He's a nice guy, a sensitive sort. I'm sure it hurt him deeply to lose his home like that.'

'It sounds like you and he are pretty pally.'

She linked arms with her husband. 'He's interesting to talk to. I like him.'

'Where's he living now he's been chucked out of the Castle?'

'He said he has a cottage on the estate at the other side of the wood. He's not been back to the Castle, has he?'

'Not that I know,' Tom said. 'I can't say I've seen him.'

Expected at Adam's cottage to help him paint the walls in the kitchen, Linda drew up her vehicle next to the Land Rover. Archie hopped down from the car and followed her to the front door. She knocked gently and waited to be admitted.

'Hey sweetie.' She greeted her lover with a kiss. 'How are you?'

'Okay,' he mumbled.

'Only okay?' She shrugged off her coat and draped it over the newel post at the bottom of the stairs.

'I think I've got a cold coming on,' he said, and affected a weak cough to demonstrate.

'Ooh, you poor thing,' She commiserated, and patted his warm cheek.

They went into the kitchen where he had already laid out a variety of paintbrushes in various shapes and sizes.

'Ready when you are, choose your weapon,' he said.

'Whoa, hold your horses, Mr Slave-Driver. I'm not on the clock yet. Coffee first and plenty of it...and radio. I can't work without music.'

He gave her a little salute. 'As madam wishes.'

Both music and coffee were supplied in abundance, and the painting progressed well.

'Oh, I love this,' she said, and turned up the radio. Leonard Cohen's Dance Me to the End of Love played out. She closed her eyes and swayed to the tune.

Adam put down his paintbrush and watched her for a moment, before taking her gently around the waist,

placing her hand on his shoulder and dancing her slowly around the kitchen table. The song faded, but the dance continued, closer and slower and more intimate, eventually ending in an intense kiss.

He suddenly drew away from her and began to cough noisily. He snatched a piece of kitchen paper off the roll, spat into it and disposed of it in the trash can.

'I'm really going to insist you see a doctor about that cough, darling,' she said.

'I will, when I've got the time,' he said, clearing his throat as he washed his hands. 'I'll give it a day or two and if it's no better, I'll go.'

'It's been weeks already.'

'Then a day or two more won't do any harm will it?'

He handed over her paintbrush. 'Finish that wall and we'll call it a day. It's too nice to stay indoors. We'll finish it tomorrow.'

The next day, as arranged, Linda arrived at the cottage ready to continue her painting task. She knocked sharply on the front door and waited to be admitted. Receiving no reply, she tried the door. Locked. She shielded her eyes and peered through the window, past the newly hung vertical blinds to the dim room beyond.

Unlit stove; TV playing in the corner; a bewildered looking Finn sitting by Adam's chair, his chin resting on...Adam's knee.

She moved to the far end of the bay to see better. Adam, in the chair, slouched low down, unmoving. Surely not asleep; nobody needed a nap at ten o'clock in the morning.

She rapped on the window. 'Adam! Wakey wakey. Adam it's me. Open the door.'

No response. 'Adam!'

Could the TV be on too loud and he couldn't hear her through the double glazing? She rapped again and called louder. 'Adam! Let me in, please.'

He still didn't move. This was definitely not right. With mounting unease, her stomach crawled up into her throat.

'Adam!' She tugged frantically on the front door handle and hammered on the wood with her fist. As a last resort, she yelled through the letterbox. 'Adam, sweetie, let me in!'

Finn whimpered in response.

'Oh God!'

She hared around to the back of the house, to where she knew Adam kept a spare key under a flat stone of pink granite, and used it to let herself in. Directly through into the living room, swiftly followed by Archie.

She found Adam slumped in the chair with his head lolled against the back; eyes closed; mouth slightly agape, corners flecked with white foam. To her horror, his lips were dark and tinged with blue.

She shook him gently by the shoulder. 'Adam, sweetheart, are you alright?' She put her hand to his hot brow and knew it to be a rhetorical question. 'No, of course you're not.'

At her touch and the sound of her voice, he managed to force his eyelids apart and turned half open eyes to her. He moved his mouth to speak, but succeeded in producing only an unpleasant crackling, bubbling sound. Every ounce of effort and energy he could muster went into drawing his next breath, each one shallow and noisy and laboured.

Her gut churned as growing panic took hold, her eyes filled with tears and she began to shake. She enclosed his burning hand with hers and kissed it.

'Don't worry darling,' she said, fighting for his sake to at least sound calm. 'I'm going to get some help for you.'

He gave the smallest nod of acknowledgement.

She tore herself away from him to reach the telephone, dial the emergency number, and request an ambulance.

Her mind raced as she tried to give clear directional instructions, remembering landmarks, describing exactly

the point where the track turned down from the main road. The operator estimated the time for the ambulance to reach her would be approximately fifteen minutes. Reassured, she unlocked the front door and returned to sit with Adam. She covered him with her coat, cleaned the foam and spittle from his mouth and held his hand tightly in hers.

'The ambulance is coming, sweetheart. You're going to be alright.'

He could only manage a small grunt and to blink slowly. His eyelids fluttered and his eyes, no longer focusing, rolled back into his head as consciousness began to leave him.

She sat on the arm of the chair and pulled him to her, holding him as she stroked his hair. 'Help is coming. You hang on, my love. Don't you dare die. Don't you dare leave me.'

The ambulance arrived within twenty minutes. The paramedics let themselves in, and while questioning Linda for information, assessed Adam's condition. After conferring among themselves, they fitted him with an oxygen mask and lifted him onto a wheeled sitting chair, covering him with a red blanket.

Linda followed them to the ambulance. 'Can I come with him?'

'Are you a relative?'

'No...just a friend. Please, he has no one else.'

The paramedic looked to his partner, who nodded consent.

Linda dashed back to the cottage and slammed both the back and front doors closed, leaving a whining Finn and bemused Archie alone inside.

She climbed into the back of the ambulance.

'Take a seat here and strap in,' the technician indicated,

She did as instructed. The rear doors of the ambulance banged shut, locking her inside the brightly lit vehicle with the paramedic and her desperately sick lover. Despite the unevenness of the track to the main

road throwing them around, the paramedic was already giving Adam his full attention.

'What do you think is wrong with him?' Linda enquired.

'At first glance, it looks as if he could have a chest infection, bronchitis possibly, but don't take my word for it. The docs will see him right, don't you worry.'

'Can I hold his hand?'

'I don't see why not.' The paramedic released Adam's hand from the folds of the blanket and Linda clutched at it and felt his hot fingers move against hers.

The ride was bumpy, and when the sirens were necessary, noisy. The paramedic's almost relaxed calmness in his treatment of Adam helped to reassure Linda somewhat. She considered that, if he were at death's door, there would have been more urgent action to pull him back. Then again, if he were a lost cause, would they waste their time?

More bumping and a loud beeping, and the vehicle began to reverse. Someone opened the doors from the outside, and Linda blinked in the sunlight.

She sat in the Waiting Room for more than two hours before a kindly looking male nurse approached, introduced himself as Colin and led her to the frighteningly named Resuscitation Room, where Adam lay on a trolley, stripped to the waist and hooked to both oxygen and a saline drip. At the sight of his helplessness, Linda whimpered.

The nurse touched her arm. 'It's okay,' he said. 'He's not in any immediate danger.'

'Is he awake?' she asked, fear keeping her voice low.

'Not fully; not yet. Because he's not been able to breathe properly, he's been a bit short of oxygen, and it's tired him out.'

'What's wrong with him?'

'We've done a chest x-ray, and it shows he has a severe acute bronchitis, and pneumonia in his right lung.'

'Pneumonia?'

One word, and her already fragile poise crumbled. Tears spilled from her eyes.

'Oh, my God, what's going to happen to him? Is he going to die? Please don't let him die.'

'He's going to be admitted to Intensive Care in a little while and they'll start him on IV antibiotics and oxygen.' Colin guided Linda to the head of the trolley. 'You can talk to him if you like, he can hear you.'

'Thank you.' She wiped her eyes and composed herself.

Unable to touch Adam's face because of the oxygen mask, she had to content herself with holding his hand and stroking his hair.

'Adam, sweetheart, can you hear me?'

His eyes flickered open and he gazed at the ceiling, disorientated for a moment, before turning his head toward her voice.

'Hey,' she said, smiling gently at him. 'You're going to be okay now. You're in hospital. They're going to look after you.'

She felt him squeeze her fingers, and he blinked twice before his exhausted eyes closed again. She sat for the next half hour with his fingers pressed to her lips.

She was not permitted into the Intensive Care Unit until Adam's treatment was under way, and she passed the time walking back and forth in a waiting area usually reserved for relatives.

After just over an hour a nurse took her through to Adam's cubicle, and behind drawn curtains she found him in a more alarming condition than previously.

Almost every part of him had something attached.

On his bare chest, four coloured discs with wires coupled him to a monitor, whose screen blazed with an array of multicoloured graphs and numbers, animated like some obscene video game. Two tubes snaked into plastic plumbing taped to the back of his right hand, both connected to IV drip bags, one containing a startlingly bright yellow liquid, the other, clear. An oxygen mask, hissing and emitting some kind of white vapour, covered his nose and mouth. Attached to his left

index finger, a device resembling a clothes peg glowed with a red light, and through the monitor's speakers his heart rate registered as a rapid, but steady beep.

She edged towards the bed, aghast at how all his normal colour had drained from him, to be replaced with a dreadful ashen blue grey. Instructed by the nurse, she used alcohol gel to clean her hands before being allowed to touch him. As soon she laid her hand on his arm, he opened weary, bloodshot eyes, and made an indecipherable noise through the mask.

'Shh,' she hushed him. 'Don't try to talk, sweetie. Save your breath.'

She watched his chest rise and fall in rapid succession, each respiration weak and shallow and nastily strident. At least he was still breathing, and she offered up a silent prayer of thanks for that mercy. She remained at his bedside and held his hand against her cheek as he slid into fitful sleep.

The nurses monitored him frequently and carefully until a doctor arrived, at which point they asked her to leave.

She took the opportunity to find a telephone and call Tom and explain to him why she wasn't at home to greet him from his work. She put together enough change from the coins in her purse, and as she dialled her home number, she mentally prepared herself for his expected reaction.

'Hello?'

'Tom, darling?'

'Linda! Where the hell are you? I got home and you weren't here.'

'I know, sweetie, I'm...I'm at the infirmary—'

'The hospital? What's happened? Are you okay? What's going on?'

'It's not me, Tom...it's...someone else.'

'Who? Not your mother? Is it your brother, Simon?'

'No, no not Mum...not family...a friend.'

'Which friend? Lizzie? Ben?'

'No, not them?'

'Then who, for God's sake?'

She paused before answering. 'A friend of mine. His name's Adam...Adam Strachan.'

It took the time of one heartbeat for the name to register with him. 'Strachan! Strachan from the Castle? The weirdo from the woods? What the fuck is going on, Linda? Why are you there with him?'

'Calm down, Tom, please, and listen to me...are you listening?'

He said nothing, but she could hear his heavy breathing.

'Tom, I need to do something for me. It's very important.' Again, silence from the end of the telephone. 'Tom, God dammit, will you answer me?'

His reply was tight and furious. 'What?'

'I need you to go to Adam's house and get the car...and Archie. The spare keys are in the teapot on the dresser. Then what I need you to do is pick up Adam's dog and take them both home with you. I came in the ambulance and had to leave them behind.'

'What the fuck has his dog got to do with me?! Why should—'

'Shut up, Tom and listen, I don't have much change. The dog's name is Finn, he's old and sick and he can't be left on his own. I want you to take him home and look after him. He won't be any trouble.'

She could hear his agitated panting down the telephone. 'Jesus and Mary, Linda, you've gone out of your tiny fucking mind this time!'

'Stop swearing at me, Tom, and do as I ask. The dogs are on their own with no food or water. I might be here for a while. I want you to take Finn to our house where he will be safe.' Once more, she met silence. 'Tom Lewis! If you do one unselfish thing in your life, do this!' she yelled. Passers-by in the corridor turned to look at her. She smiled weakly at them.

'Okay. Where do I go?' he snarled after a long pause.

She gave him instructions on how to reach the cottage by bicycle. Remembering she had left both doors unlocked, she reminded him to ensure the cottage's security before he left.

'Where are you now?' he asked curtly.

'Adam's in ICU at the moment, but he may be transferred when he's stable. Don't bother about me. Please go and find the dogs.'

She heard him exhale through his teeth. 'Alright, I'm going. I'll sort this out...and then I'm coming to get you.'

'You don't need to come here, everything's under control. I'll be okay.'

'I'm-coming-to-get-you.'

Without another word, he hung up, leaving her with the dead receiver in her hand. She gently replaced it in its cradle and stood with her hand on it, simply staring at it. A voice behind her startled her.

'Excuse me? Are you done?'

She offered an apologetic smile to the waiting man. 'I'm so sorry. Yes, I'm done.'

Back in the ICU waiting room, she stood and watched water from an early evening cloudburst course down the third storey window. The clouds suddenly parted and bright sunshine streamed through the wetness, draping a lacy, moving shadow across her face. Lost in her own thoughts, someone entered the room unnoticed. He cleared his throat to attract her attention, and introduced himself as Dr Ahmed.

Despite his Asian appearance, his voice carried a slight Scots accent. 'I understand you are a friend of Mr Strachan's,' he said.

'Yes, I am.'

'Does Mr Strachan have any relatives we can contact?'

'He has brothers and a sister, but I have no idea how to get hold of them. I think some of them are abroad. Can you not talk to me? He would want me to know. If you need me to sign anything, I'll take full responsibility.'

'It's alright Miss...?' He waited for an introduction.

'Linda...Linda Lewis.'

'No, Ms Lewis, we don't need you to sign anything.'

'Can you tell me what's wrong with him and what's going to happen?'

'Medical information is generally confidential...'

'I understand, but can't you at least tell me if he might die? Don't I deserve to know that at least?'

He glanced over his shoulder as if to ensure they were alone before he broke the rules.

'I don't suppose it can do any harm. Won't you sit down?'

'I have had plenty of experience of cases like Mr Strachan's over the years,' he explained, sitting beside her. 'And even though he has a severe acute bronchitis and the beginnings of pneumonia in his right lung, I'm confident that after the appropriate treatment here, and with plenty of careful care at home, he should make a full recovery, although it may take some time. I know everything looks very frightening at the moment and you are very worried, but there really is no need to be, although he's not out of the woods yet by any means.'

She breathed a deep sigh of relief, resisting the urge to hug the man. 'Oh, thank you doctor. Thank you so much.'

'We have caught it in time. He seems to be a generally healthy man, so the bronchitis should clear up without too many ill effects. As for the pneumonia, it's not too far advanced, so an intensive course of strong antibiotics, nebulisers and oxygen should start to see him start to come right in a few days.'

She closed her eyes as she took all in the information, and realised she was shaking.

'He doesn't need to stay in ICU,' Ahmed continued, with a brief touch to her hand. 'He'll be transferred onto a medical ward just as soon as there's a bed available, probably sometime later this evening.'

Linda bobbed her head vigorously. 'I understand, yes. Can I see him soon?'

The doctor smiled his reassurance. 'Of course. I'll take you to him.'

He led her back to Adam's bedside, and left them alone.

Adam rested, propped up on pillows, his eyes closed, chest straining as he struggled to breathe. The mask over his mouth and nose hissed and leaked nebulising vapour. Linda listened intently to his heart monitor. To her untrained ears it had a regular, even pattern, which she took to be a good sign, indicative of deep, healing sleep.

She sat with him for more than two hours, until a combination of strain and tiredness, the regular, hypnotic rhythm of the monitor, and the dimness of the lighting, drifted her into a light doze. The touch of a nurse's hand on her shoulder startled her wide awake.

'Adam?'

'He's fine,' the nurse whispered. 'I'm sorry to disturb you, but there's someone here looking for you. He says his name is Tom Lewis.'

Linda's heart sank. 'Oh no! I told him not to come. Where is he?'

'I've put him in the Relatives' Room. If you don't mind me saying so, he looks a little cross.'

'Oh dear,' she sighed, and left Adam's side to find her husband.

Chapter 20

She peeped through the small glass aperture in the door, to see Tom striding across the Relatives' Room, alternately clenching and unclenching his fists and cracking his knuckles. She took a deep breath, pushed the door open and went in.

'What the fuck is going on, Linda?' he bellowed, the moment he saw her.

'Shush, Tom. Have some respect.' She closed the door. 'There are very sick people in there.'

He pointed aggressively in the direction of the ward. 'What are you doing here with that gun toting madman?'

'Sit down and calm down.'

'No, I won't calm down. I want to know what the hell you're doing here with that man.'

'He's a friend and he's sick. He was on his own and he needed help. I had to come with him.'

'Exactly what sort of a friend is he, Linda? What were you doing at his house?'

'That's none of your concern at the moment.'

'I'm making it my concern, Lind. You're my wife. I have a right to know!'

'Stop shouting, Tom. Someone will hear.'

'I don't give a flying fuck who hears! I'll ask you one more time, Lind, what were you doing at his house?'

'I was there to help him paint his kitchen, if you must know.'

He curled his fingers into a tight fist and held it against his mouth, regarding her closely. She remained unmoved, meeting his stern stare, but not yielding under it. Low and measured, he said;

'I asked you only a couple of days ago whether you knew him and you said he was just someone you'd met once or twice, someone you walked the dog with.'

'He is...was...is.'

He wheeled away from her. 'You fucking liar!'

'What would you rather I'd done, Tom? I have walked away and left him to die? Is that what you would have done if it had been one of your friends?' He continued to pace around the room, breathing hard.

'Well, would it?'

Pace. Clench. Unclench.

'He's very sick, Tom, and he was too weak to get help for himself. If I hadn't gone round to see him when I did, he might well have died - alone.'

He dropped onto the seating, his chin to his chest.

'You didn't have to come here with him.'

She slid in beside him. 'Yes, I did, Tom. I really did.'

His face fixed in a rigid scowl and he clamped his hands tightly together in his lap.

'Did you manage to get the dogs home?'

He made a small motion of his head which she took to be a nod. 'I did as you told me,' he said brusquely.

'They're both at our house, fed and watered. When I left them, they were on the sofa together, snuggled up like best buddies.'

'Thank you for doing that. Knowing Finn is okay will be one less thing for Adam to worry about.'

'Well good for him. What do I have to worry about, Lind...hmm?'

They sat in stony silence for the next ten minutes. Linda drew herself a cup of water from the dispenser and sipped at it. Tom picked at his nails, his jaw working in agitation.

'What exactly is this bloke to you?' he said, ripping apart the suffocating blanket of quiet in the room.

She sipped from her paper cup. 'I'm very fond of him. He's a lovely, gentle man who's been through a really tough time recently. This is just a very sour cherry on a very unpleasant cake. I—'

He got to his feet and stood at the window, putting distance between them again, and stared out at the growing darkness of the evening.

'Are you having an affair with him?' he said to her reflection in the glass.

Silence.

'I can't help but notice you haven't denied it.'

'I don't...I don't know as I would call it an affair,' she said. 'But we have spent quite a bit of time together.'

'Are you in love with him?'

'I love him, but that's not the same thing.'

'Have you had sex with him?'

Again, silence.

'I'll take your silence as a yes then, shall I? How many times?'

'Please, Tom, this is not the time or the place for this.'

He spun round. 'When will it be the time, Linda?' he said, his voice low and coarse. 'When exactly will ever be the 'right time' for us to discuss the death of our marriage?'

'Please, Tom...don't...'

Her fragile state could take no more; it gave way under the strain, and she began to cry softly.

The door opened and a nurse peeped through. 'I'm sorry to intrude, may I come in.'

Linda snatched a tissue from a handily provided box and wiped at her eyes and nose.

'Yes. Do. Is Adam, okay?'

Tom, still staring into the dusk, huffed disdainfully.

'We've found a bed on the medical ward for Mr Strachan and we'll be transferring him shortly,' said the nurse. 'Will you want to go with him, Ms Lewis?'

Linda looked at Tom, his moist eyes simultaneously blazing with anger, yet pleading with her to abandon her lover to his fate and go home with him.

She felt her loyalties tear down the middle. Stay or go? Adam or Tom? What to do?

'Yes,' she said, her steady gaze on Tom. 'I will.'

The colour drained from Tom's face. He drew his mouth into a tight line, snatched his jacket from the seat and stormed out of the room. They heard the security buzzer sound as he crashed his way out of the ward.

'I'm sorry about that,' Linda said. 'He's a little upset.'

'Is Mr Strachan a friend of his too?'

'No. Just mine.'

'Ah!' The nurse nodded with diplomatic understanding.

Linda followed close behind as a porter and a nurse moved Adam to the Medical ward. With quiet efficiency, they transferred him to a standard bed in a quiet side room. The curtains were pulled around, shutting her out, and she paced the corridor in agitation as the nurses consulted his notes, conferred with each other, and settled him in.

Twenty minutes passed before they allowed her back inside to sit with him. She laid a brief kiss on his brow. 'How are you feeling?' she said.

The creasing of his eyes told her he was trying to smile behind the mask and he mumbled something sounding like; 'Chest...concrete.'

'Oh, babe, I've never been so frightened in my life.' She touched her lips to his hair. 'I thought you were going to leave me.'

His voice, frail and broken and barely audible, whispered; 'I'm sorry.'

'Why didn't you go the doctor's, you silly man?'

'I thought...a cold.' He coughed into the mask, thick and wet and unpleasant, and he put his hand against his chest.

'Does it hurt?'

'Only...when...I laugh.'

She held his warm hand in hers. 'You're going to be alright, Adam. You're very sick, but you mustn't worry. You're going to be alright.' She held his hand to her face and he stroked her cheek with his thumb.

'Finn,' he said.

'I'm sorry, sweetie?'

'Finn,' he repeated.

'Finn's fine. Tom went to get him and he took him to our house.'

He opened his eyes wide. 'Tom?'

'He's here. He came to take me home, but I'm not leaving you.'

'Where...is he...now?'

'I don't know and it's not important. You're what's important right now. I'll deal with him later.' She clutched at his hand with both of hers and kissed his fingers.

After a short while of them sitting quietly together, she became aware of the curtain moving behind her and assumed it to be the nurse returning. Adam's grip on her hand tightened into a painful clench and his eyes fixed on a point over her right shoulder.

She turned to look.

Dark, furious eyes stared out from Tom's pale, strained face at the desperately sick man in the bed.

'I'm not leaving him, Tom. Don't even try to make me,' she said, determinedly.

The two men's eyes locked on each other, and Adam's already strained breathing became more laboured as the incensed Tom advanced on him. Over his mask, Linda saw Adam's eyes widen with terror and she stood to his defence.

'Don't Tom, you're upsetting him. Leave him alone.'

Tom leaned very close to growl into his rival's ear. 'I should wring your fucking neck where you lie, you sheep shagging BASTARD!'

'Tom!'

'And don't think hiding behind my wife will save you, because you can rest assured, as soon as you're fit enough to stand up, I'm going to take great pleasure in knocking you flat, stamping all over that smug mug of yours, and kicking seven shades of shit out of you.'

He punched an indentation into the pillow inches from Adam's face. Adam flinched and Linda grabbed at her husband's arm, fearful his next move might be an actual blow.

'Leave him, Tom, please! Can't you see how sick he is?'

Tom's anger reached boiling point and he glared at her with eyes burning with anger and humiliation. He threw back the curtains and marched from the room, his footsteps echoing as he retreated down the corridor.

'Holy...shit,' panted Adam, a phrase she heard quite clearly despite the hiss of the oxygen.

She rubbed the back of his hand to calm him. 'Sshh, it's okay,' she said soothingly. 'He's gone. Don't worry, sweetheart, he can't touch you in here, you're perfectly safe.'

'I'm not...not bothered...about me.' Cough. 'What about you? What's he...what's he going...to do...to you.'

'He won't touch me.'

'Go...to him.'

'I don't want to leave you.'

'There's nothing...you can do here...I'm not going anywhere...go.'

Chapter 21

Linda searched the ward and the outside corridor for her husband. She finally found him in the stairwell, sitting on the metal steps with his head in his hands. His fingers gripped at his hair and his shoulders quaked as he shed his tears, mourning the supposed end of his marriage. She laid her hand on his shoulder, resisting his attempt to shrug her off, and sat beside him.

'What do you want?' he said bitterly.

'I came to find you.'

'Why? You'd rather be with him. That much is obvious.'

'No, Tom. I needed to be with you now.'

He buried his face in his hands. 'What's happening here, Lind?' he wailed. 'It's like some horrible nightmare. Wake me up...make it all go away.'

'I'm sorry, babe.'

'How could you do this to me? How could you kill me like this? I thought you loved me.'

'I do.'

'Then how could you do it?'

'It wasn't intentional. It was one of those things that started off as nothing and just...grew.'

He looked at her with eyes red and swollen with crying; tears flowed from them almost as fast as he could wipe them away.

'I love you, Lind. I've always loved you. You have always been the only woman for me.'

'I know all that, Tom.'

'Then why wasn't it enough for you? Why wasn't *I* enough?'

She moved her hand to the nape of his neck and stroked up into his hair. 'I haven't stopped loving you, Tom. I just found myself loving someone else as well.'

'You can't love two people at once?' he said, wiping his nose on his sleeve. 'It's not possible.'

'Of course it is. You don't have to stop loving one person to be able to love someone else. It's a fact of human nature that a heart simply gets bigger to accommodate two people instead of one.'

He let out a single loud sob, and his eyes and nose streamed with tears and mucus. She dug in her bag for a fresh packet of tissues and wiped his face as gently any mother tending to a hysterical child. She gave him a clean tissue and he blew his nose noisily.

'What's gone wrong with me that made you want someone else?' he asked, his voice thick with emotion. 'He's better than I am in bed, isn't he? That's what it is, isn't it? When he fucked you, he was better than me?'

She kept her tone patiently calm in the face of his mounting hysteria. 'No, sweetheart, he's not better...just different.'

He bit down on his lip as he swallowed down another sob, and she ran her hand up and down his back, an action she knew had always been a comfort to him in the past.

'Are you going to leave me?' he sniffled. 'Are you going to go off with him?'

'No, never. I love Adam, but he appreciates I will always be married to you. I will never leave you for him. I've made it abundantly clear, and he understands and accepts it.'

'I couldn't bear it if you left me, Lind. I can't be without you. I can forgive you anything, even this, if you promise you'll never leave me.' He sniffed wetly. 'If you leave me, I swear, I'll kill myself. I'll take pills...I'll drive the car into a wall...or...or I'll hang myself.'

'That's just silly talk babe, and you know you don't mean it. I promise, I'm not going anywhere.'

He wiped his face with his hands. 'What's going to happen now? Are you going to carry on seeing him?'

'I have to. He's very ill, and when he's discharged from here, he's going to need a lot of looking after until he's fully recovered. I won't abandon him. I have to take care of him.'

Tom looked horrified. 'Why you? Why can't someone else do it? Anyone else? Not you.'

'He has no-one else, Tom. He's all on his own.'

'He must have other friends...relations.'

'He did, in the past, but he lost all his friends when his money ran out. They dumped him when he wasn't socially acceptable any more. His family don't want anything to do with him either. I'm all he's got.'

The door to the stairwell opened; footsteps on the stairs.

A pair of legs in sensible shoes pushed their way past Linda. 'I'm sorry, excuse me please.'

They descended to the half landing, carrying with them a young female doctor in a white coat, and as they turned to trot down the next flight of the stairwell, she and Linda exchanged glances, one of curiosity, the other strained and confused.

Oblivious to the intrusion, Tom wiped wet tearstains from his cheeks.

'I know how utterly shattered you are by all this, darling, believe me,' Linda said, when the stairwell once more belonged to them. 'It wasn't meant to happen this way, but it has, and we have to deal with it as best we can, but not now. At this moment, my main concern is that poor man up there who is hovering between life and death. He's sick, he's scared and he needs me.'

She took his face in her hands. 'Remember what you were like when you thought you might lose your leg, Tom? Remember how frightened you were?'

Tom bobbed his head.

'Now *he's* frightened and *he* needs help. Let me go to him. Let me sit with him and be a comfort to him. If you love me at all, you'll do the right thing and let me go to him.'

'I do I...love you, Lind. I do.'

'Then you have to trust me.' She moved his face to hers and kissed him on the lips. 'Trust me, Tom.'

She made to get up; Tom grabbed her wrist strongly, pulling her back to him. 'If...if I let you see him, will you c...come home with me afterwards?'

Stammering now. Not a good sign. He was about to crack, but she couldn't give in. She gave him a small, comforting smile.

'When I know he's out of danger and it's safe to leave him, you can take me home, alright?'

'I'll...I'll wait for you.'

'It could be a long time.'

'How...how long?'

'These things take time. There's no way of knowing. It could be a couple of hours or it could take all night. However long it is, I'm staying until I'm satisfied it's safe to go. Are you willing to wait a night?'

'If I have to, yes. I'll w...wait for you in the café.'

'Thank you, darling.'

She put her hands to his face and drew him to her and kissed his flushed forehead and his pale lips.

'And as soon as I am able, I'll come and find you.'

'P...promise.'

'I promise.'

She left Tom sitting on the stairs, and returned to Adam's ward.

Chapter 22

Official evening visiting hours had already begun and the ward hummed with the chatter of relatives and friends visiting their loved ones. The curtains were still drawn around Adam's bed and Linda found her way in, cleaned her hands with the alcohol gel from a container attached to the foot of the bed, and sat in the chair beside him. She took his hand, alarmed at how hot it felt. At the touch of her cool lips against his skin, he opened his eyes.

'You came back?' he said through the hiss of the oxygen.

'I didn't want you to be on your own. How are you feeling?'

A series of thick wet hacks answered for him. He pulled his mask away from his face, indicating a box of tissues on his bedside cabinet. She plucked one out, handed it to him and he spat a mouthful of vile looking phlegm into the tissue and secured the goblet within its folds. She took it from him and dropped it into the paper bag taped to the cabinet.

'Where's Tom?' he asked as he fitted his mask back over his nose and mouth.

She cleaned her hands again. 'He's waiting for me downstairs,' she said. 'Now, don't talk and save your strength. I'll sit here quietly and keep you company for a while. Do you want a drink of water, your lips look dry?'

He nodded weakly and moved his mask again. She poured water into the tumbler and held it steady for him. When he had done, she arranged the mask over his moistened mouth and lips and he closed his eyes, exhausted by even this minimal effort. He didn't wake again until over an hour later, disturbed by a bell rung to declare visiting time ended. He turned his head to see her still sat beside him.

'I have to go now, darling,' she said, standing. 'Tom's going to take me home, but I'll be back tomorrow, I promise. I'll bring you some things you might need.' She kissed his forehead and brushed his hair off his face. 'You're going to be fine. You're in good hands. I love you and I want you back in one piece. I want to walk in the woods with you again because there are some paths we haven't been on yet, and you promised to show me the badger sett, remember.'

'That I did.'

'And I'm holding you to that promise. Now get your rest.' She moved the hissing mask to one side and kissed his lips.

'I love you, Lind,' he mumbled.

'And I love you, my dear heart. You have nothing to do but go back to sleep and get better.'

She gave him another farewell kiss, replaced his mask, and blowing him a kiss as she exited the curtains, left the ward to find her husband.

Just as Adam had been four months previously, Tom was in the cafeteria, waiting for her. She sat beside him at his table and gave him a reassuring smile. His expression remained one of resigned blankness, his eyes still red and puffy. He had a cup of once hot chocolate on the table before him.

'Are you going to drink that?' she said.

'It's cold.'

They sat in silence, neither looking at the other, both staring at the liquid in the cup, a dark brown skin forming on it as it cooled.

The assistant from behind the counter appeared at their table. 'Can I take that?' she said, indicating the cup. 'We're getting ready to close soon.'

Linda handed her the cup with thanks; Tom paid neither of them any heed.

'Are you ready to go home now?'

'Do we have a home?'

She stood with her hand out. 'I'll drive.'

Without argument, he pulled the car keys from his pocket and handed them to her.

Tense silence accompanied the drive home.

They stopped at a filling station on the way. While she pumped fuel, she could see him slumped in the passenger seat, staring blankly out of the windscreen like a man in deep shock.

It was late when they arrived home, but not yet fully dark. She parked at the front of the house, under the dull yellow glow of a street light. Once in the house, Tom took off his coat and went directly upstairs. Linda greeted the dogs and let them out into the garden to relieve themselves, checked their food and water supply would last them the night, and then put them to bed and made her own way upstairs.

Tom wasn't in bed.

After changing into her nightclothes and turning down the duvet, she went to find him.

The light from the landing fell on him as he lay, fully clothed, on the bed in the spare room, curled on his side, his arms wrapped protectively around himself.

'Please don't sleep in here, Tom. I want you with me, in our bed.' His eyes remained closed and he didn't move. 'Please, baby...you belong in our bed...with me.'

'I don't seem to belong anywhere any more,' he said, his voice broken and hoarse.

'You do, darling...we belong together.'

He raised his eyes to look at her, silhouetted in the doorway, her hand extended to him.

'Please, babe, come to bed.'

'Go away,' he said huskily, and rolled over, presenting her with a stiff, unmoving back.

She left him.

In the early hours, he came into the bedroom, stripped down to his boxers, and climbed in the bed beside her. She put out her hand to welcome him. He moved further to his own side, creating a gap as wide as an Alpine gorge. And there they lay, not touching, not speaking, him staring fixedly at the ceiling, hands

clasped across his chest, breathing steadily through his mouth.

'Did you do it in this bed?' he asked, presently.

An honest whisper replied. 'No.'

'Did he ever come into the house?'

'Once. After he took me to visit you in hospital. When the car broke down.'

'That would be your anonymous friend in the café?'

'Yes.'

'Did you screw him then? On the rug; on the sofa; on the kitchen table, knowing I was safely out of the way?'

'No. I made him some supper, we talked, we had a drink, and he went home.'

'So where did you fuck him?'

'I wish you wouldn't use that word, Tom, it's so coarse. We made love, like we do.'

'Like we did,' he corrected her.

'Please don't say—'

'Where?' he demanded.

'At his cottage a few times...and in the woods.'

Tom lay quietly for a good while before asking; 'How sick is he? Is he going to die?'

She breathed deeply. 'He's very poorly right now, but he'll be alright; it's just going to take some time.'

Tom drew his mouth into a tight line, his chin jutting, mind churning. A tear leaked from the corner of his eye and coursed slowly down the side of his face. She brushed away the wetness with her fingers. He did not react to her touch.

'You're not going to hurt him, are you?' she said.

'Give me one damned good reason why I shouldn't.'

'Because he doesn't deserve it. If you need to take it out on anyone, take it out on me. He hasn't done anything wrong. It's my fault. If you need to punish anyone, punish me.'

He screwed his eyes tightly closed and shook his head as if trying to force his scrambled thoughts into some semblance of order. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

'I don't know what I want, Lind. Everything's all fucked up now. Nothing makes any sense any more. I don't know...' He gulped loudly, but could not suppress a single sob. 'I love you so much. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. You're killing me here. I feel like I want to explode. I want to smash everything up. I want to wring the fucking life out him with my bare hands, I want to kick his head in...I want to...to...' He threw his arm over his face and dissolved into tears.

The awful depth of his despair made Linda's heart move in her chest. She closed the gap and gathered her distraught husband in her arms. His was a state of total wretchedness, and it was her doing. She had broken him, yet he didn't push her away.

'Don't let him take you away from me,' he mumbled against her. 'I'll die without you. I can't live without you.'

She shushed him and held him tightly to her. 'He won't, my love. He won't.'

Utterly emotionally and physically spent, he finally fell into sleep in her arms.

He woke again a couple of hours later.

Unable to get back to sleep, left the warmth of his wife and his bed to seek distraction in overnight TV. It didn't work, and he gave up to it.

He took their wedding photograph from the mantle and wept quietly for the happy couple in it, consoling himself with a hefty measure of the Laphroaigh, before finally falling asleep on the sofa hugging the photograph. First light woke him and greeted him with a headache and a crick in his neck.

He heard Linda moving around upstairs, returned the photograph to the mantle shelf and lay back down on the sofa. Moments later, there she was, crouching by him.

'I missed you in bed,' she said, smoothing his tousled hair.

He rubbed and rolled his neck to alleviate the stiffness. 'I couldn't sleep.'

'Do you want some breakfast?'

'I'm not hungry.'

Her nose twitched. 'Have you been drinking?'

'I think I'm entitled under the circumstances, don't you?'

She put her hands on her knees and pushed herself upright. 'I'll make us some coffee.'

He lay still on the sofa, listening to her pottering about in the kitchen, making coffee as if it were a normal morning on a normal day, not a matter of hours since she had shattered his world with her shocking disclosure.

Shortly, she came back with a steaming cup in either hand. He sat up and took one from her. They sat in silence on the sofa, sipping slowly and deliberately from their drinks. Soon the tension became too much for Linda to bear.

'Talk to me, Tom. Don't bottle it up.'

'I don't think there's anything else to say,' he said. 'You've already told me you won't give him up and I can't compete with him. Game over. What is there to talk about?'

'There's nothing to compete with.'

'Of course there is. I've seen him, remember, strolling around in the wood like he owns the place with a gun over his shoulder. Big, strong, a real man. Even lying helpless in his sickbed I can see he's more than I am.'

'That's such rubbish, Tom.'

'Are you going to deny he's a great fuck?'

'Tom, please.'

'And what about me? You used to think I was a great fuck once.'

'Of course you are, sweetheart, you always have been. But there's more to it than sex.'

'Such as?'

She puffed out her cheeks. 'Adam's everything you're not and you're everything he's not.'

Tom frowned. 'What sort of gibberish is that? Talk sense, woman.'

'It's something Adam said when I compared your personalities—'

He looked at her, aghast. 'You talked about me with him? You compared us?'

'Yes. And he said that together you and he were like the two halves of one complete, perfect man. That's why I said making love with him wasn't better...just different.' She pulled up her knees, crossed her arms over and rested her chin on them. As Tom didn't seem to have any retort, she continued. 'The sex was nice, but it wasn't the be all and end all. There is so much more to him. I love him because he's sensitive and thoughtful, gentle and quiet—'

'I can be sensitive and thoughtful,' he blurted.

'Yes you can...if you really try, but Adam doesn't have to try. It's in his nature. You are brash and spontaneous, giddy and reckless. Sometimes you even come across as aggressive and vulgar—'

'I can't help how I am?'

'And why would you want to? I love the way you are. There's never a dull moment when you're around, Tom. You're like a one-man Christmas cracker. But with him it's completely different. In his company I find mostly peace and quietude—'

'I suppose you would. He's such an old fart...what is he, fifty?'

'He's only forty six, although he does look a little older. And he's not an 'old fart' as you so generously put it, and as you don't even know him, you can't make any judgements.'

'Then enlighten me.'

'He might seem a little staid, but that's because he has traditional values. He's had a completely different upbringing from us. He's had a lot of responsibilities and duties and as a result of them he's been somewhat isolated and it's left him vulnerable and lonely.'

'Well, boo hoo,' he mocked cynically. 'You'll have me feeling sorry for the old bastard in a minute.'

'You'll be his age soon enough...in ten short years.'

'That I may be,' he countered, 'but I'll make damned sure I'm not that boring.'

Linda finished her drink. 'Are you going into work today?'

He snorted. 'What do you think? Do you really think I could face going anywhere near the Castle knowing what you and he got up to there. The temptation to burn it to the ground might be too much to resist.'

'We did nothing there but talk and drink coffee. I hate the place. That cellar where he was living, it was truly horrible. I think that's why he got sick. All that cold and damp and mould got right into him.'

'So he got himself a nice warm cottage and you fell into his bed there instead, didn't you?'

She pulled at a thread on her dressing gown and nodded silently.

'It's nice to know you still have some standards,' he said, and thrust his empty mug into her hand before traipsing his way upstairs.

At eight o'clock, she rang Bill Paterson and made excuses for Tom's absence from his work.

Chapter 23

She managed to convince Tom nothing untoward had happened at the Castle, and although still in a foul mood, he returned to work the next day. She stated her intention to visit Adam at the hospital and stay for as long as she could.

Tom protested vociferously, but ultimately in vain.

For each of the next five days, when she arrived to visit Adam, she approached the ward sister.

'How is he today, sister?'

The replies were nothing if not consistent. 'Not much change yet, I'm sorry.'

Most of the time, Adam slept through her visits, unaware of her presence, yet she would still sit by his bed, reading quietly to him from the newspaper or a magazine. She didn't mind that he wasn't paying any attention. The combination of medication and sleep would heal him, and as long as he continued to get better, that was all that mattered to her.

Eventually, she was given the good news she had been praying for.

'He seems a little better today,' said the nurse as she consulted his notes. 'He seems to have turned a corner. The antibiotics are doing their job and we've done away with the oxygen mask in favour of tubes. They're a little less cumbersome. His chest and cough are still pretty bad, but we've started him on some physiotherapy to try to clear the congestion a little quicker. His temperature is stable, and he seems a little brighter in himself. All in all, we have progress.'

'Has he eaten anything?'

'He doesn't seem to want to yet, but we're giving him liquid food to keep his strength up. As long as he keeps up his fluid intake, he won't come to any harm for another day or two.'

After thanking the nurse, she made her way to Adam's bedside. The curtains were drawn back and he was resting comfortably, propped against a pile of fat white pillows with the radio headphones clamped in his ears. She kissed his brow, still warm under her lips. He opened his eyes and offered her a smile as he removed the earpieces.

'Hey, sweetie,' she said. 'How are you feeling?'

'Not too bad, considering,' he croaked. His breathing seemed a little easier, however his chest continued to sound wheezy and bubbly. He coughed, and spat into the tissue clutched in his hand.

'You look a little brighter, but the nurse tells me you're not eating.'

'I don't have much of an appetite yet.'

'Would you like me to bring you something in from home?'

'No, I'm sure the food will be fine when I fancy some.'

'I wouldn't put too much faith in that assumption.'
She hoisted a bag onto the bed and unzipped it. 'I've brought you some extra things; a new toothbrush, toothpaste, wash things, a fresh razor, clean pyjamas, a book and some magazines, and some juice. No grapes I'm afraid.'

'Thanks, but you didn't have to. I'm feeling much better. I'll be out of here in a day or so.'

She chuckled quietly. 'I wouldn't bank on that either.'
She unpacked the contents of the bag into his bedside locker and drawer. 'If you need anything else, let me know.'

With everything in place, she pulled a chair close up to the bedside and sat down, took his hand and enclosed it with hers.

'How's Tom?' he said.

She inhaled deeply. 'To say he's angry and disappointed would be somewhat of an understatement. I think I've managed to talk him out of killing you, though.'

'Thanks for that...and I'm sorry.'

'There's nothing to be sorry for.'

'You shouldn't be here. You should be at home with him, that's where you belong. Forget about me, put this right.'

'There is nothing to put right, except you getting better.'

'I've destroyed your marriage.'

'Rubbish! You haven't done anything, and there's nothing he can do to stop me seeing you.'

'What's going to happen now?'

'I don't know, but of one thing I am certain - we'll get through this - all of us. Tom and I have always been strong together. It might be a bigger wrinkle than we've had to face in the past, but nothing is insurmountable. And none of it is your fault.'

He coughed to clear phlegm from his throat and took a minute to catch his breath.

'When I get out of here,' he said hoarsely, 'it might be best if I disappear. I'll sell up and move away. Out of sight, out of mind, and then you can get your lives back without me casting a shadow.'

She pressed his fingers to her lips. 'You'll do no such thing. What's happened has happened, it's already cast in stone, there's no changing it. You going anywhere won't make a pennyworth of difference to anything, except to make me very unhappy.'

She diligently visited Adam every day, until the afternoon the ward sister called her into her private office and got straight to the point.

'Mr Strachan is ready to be discharged, probably within the next 48 hours.'

'Oh, that's marvellous, Sister. He'll be so pleased.'

'But there is a bit of a problem.'

'How so?'

'He's being rather cagey about his current living arrangements. In fact he's being downright evasive about it.'

'Typical.'

'He says he can manage on his own. You wouldn't believe the number of times we've heard that one, and then had them back a week later.'

'That's not going to happen.'

'I sincerely hope not, which is why I would like you to tell me a little about where he lives.'

'In a small cottage he's doing up.'

'Alone?'

'Yes.'

'And what state is the cottage in?'

'It's being refurbished. It's almost finished, but not quite.'

Linda described the state of readiness of Adam's cottage; its location, its facilities and the nearness of his neighbours.

The sister listened, nodded and consulted Adam's notes. 'I'm afraid it may not be enough, Ms Lewis.'

'Why so?'

'Although Mr Strachan is well enough to be discharged from the hospital,' she said, 'he's still poorly and still going to need a lot of looking after. He'll be on a variety of medications, will need to eat well, take exercise in the fresh air. It may be necessary to put him under the care of the District Nurse who will call in daily and check up on him—'

'—he won't like that one bit. There will be...ructions. He doesn't like being told what to do.' Pause. 'I'll do it.'

The nurse looked directly at Linda. 'Are you medically qualified?'

'No, but I can learn, and I have the time to spend with him. A district nurse hasn't. I can stay with him for most of the day—'

'What about at night?'

'Hmm. That might be more of a problem—'

And then, like a cartoon light bulb going on in her head, she had an idea.

'But I might have a solution,' she said. 'It's pretty radical and unconventional, and I'll have to speak to my husband about it when I get home, so leave it with me and I'll get back to you.'

Linda discussed her meeting with the ward sister with Adam. When she presented him with her outlandish plan for his recuperation, the shock brought on an episode of coughing that left him blue in the face and gasping for breath.

Tom, on receiving the same news, stamped around the living room, cursing up a blue streak, his hands on his head as preventing the top from exploding with rage.

'Have you come completely fucking unhinged, woman!? You must have, because I can think of no other rational explanation for *anyone* coming up with such a shit stupid scheme!'

Linda sat immobile on the sofa, hands folded in her lap. 'It's only for a few weeks.'

'Fuck OFF!'

'Tom, please. You're being very unreasonable.'

He leaned into her, face red with fury, vein pulsing in his temple.

'Un-reasonable! Me!' he spat through gritted teeth. 'You're the one who wants to move your fucking boyfriend into OUR house. Talk about sticking the knife in and twisting it. How much more do you want to humiliate me, Linda? Why don't you just cut my balls off and nail them to the garden gate! Jesus Christ!!'

She remained as calm as a millpond. 'There is no need to be vulgar, Tom, and I am not trying to humiliate you. I am simply trying to do what's best for a sick man who needs twenty four hour care for a little while.'

'Then let him go into a fucking nursing home with the other old gits where he belongs!'

She put out her hand to pause his pacing. 'Please, Tom, sit down and listen to what I have to say...' He stopped pacing and stared at her. 'Please...?'

He flopped down onto the sofa his hands laced together in his lap. Below his thunderous scowl, his mouth puckered like the knot end of a balloon.

She laid her hand on top of his. 'Will you listen to what I have to say, darling, just for a minute, without interruption?'

He gave a twitch of his head, which she took to be a reluctant nod of agreement.

'I know you are very, very angry with me at the moment.—'

He snorted derision.

'—and I know you're feeling rejected and dishonoured, but there are some facts you need to consider.'

And sniffed.

'Number one: Even though Adam and I love each other, we are not *in* love. I care for him deeply, as a very dear friend. Two: I love you just as much, if not more, than when I married you and that, I promise, will never, ever change. Three: It *is* possible to love two people equally without diminishment to one or the other, especially when the two people are so considerably different to each other as you and Adam are. Everything I said to you in the stairwell was the absolute truth. I love you with all my heart and soul. I will never leave you, and Adam will not take me away from you. Do you believe me when I say that?'

A pause as he considered her words. His mouth relaxed and his head twitched again.

'Okay. Now, because I care for Adam, I want to see him fit and well and healthy again. To do that most effectively, he needs round the clock care and supervision and he cannot get that left on his own, isolated in his cottage. Do you agree?'

He moved only his brow, deepening his frown.

'Do you?'

Reluctantly, another small nod.

'So, it makes sense that he should move in here with us,' she said. 'We always have the spare room ready for guests, and that's what he will be - a guest. While he's here I'll be able to keep a close eye on him, administer his medication as and when he needs it, make sure he

rests and eats properly, and as soon as he's fit enough, he can go home again.'

'And then you'll stop seeing him?' Both a question *and* a statement.

'We've haven't just been lovers, Tom, we've also become close friends. I can't just cut off contact. It would be too unkind.'

Tom drew his lips back into a tight white line, and she could see his chest heaving as he seethed with anger and resentment and humiliation, but she had one more point to make. No less than an ultimatum.

'If you don't allow Adam to come here for his recuperation, I shall have no choice but to move into the cottage with him, and take care of him there.'

Tom's face paled to paper white. 'No! Absolutely not! You...you're not doing that. I won't...I won't allow it.'

'One way or another Tom, I am going to take care of Adam. The choice is yours. Here...or there.'

A growing panic replaced his anger and it became evident in his tightening voice and worsening stutter.

'You...you said, you sw...swore, you would never leave me for him. N...now you're saying you're go...going to do just that!'

'I'm not leaving you Tom. I'm just proposing staying with a sick friend until he's better, however long it takes.'

'No-no-NO!' Overwhelmed by circumstances sliding out of his control, he buried his face in his hands.

'I ca-can't cope with this, Linda. Everything you say is ins-ane. You-you're just p-piling one lu-ludicrous idiotic th-ing on t-top of another. This whole sit-uation is just unbel-unbe-be— Oh, fuck it!'

He shot to his feet and darted from the room, up the stairs, and slammed the bedroom door with such force it brought down a framed print from the landing wall.

With him gone, Archie and Finn, who had both watched the exchange from the safety of the kitchen, felt brave enough to come forwards.

Linda fondled both dogs' heads and sighed.

'Oh dearie me, boys, this is a proper pickle isn't it?'

Tom stayed upstairs for more than an hour, throwing things and banging doors. He shouted at both himself and the world in general - his usual method of expressing his temper.

While Linda waited for him to come down again, she made herself a cup of tea, cleaned out the fridge, and finally turned her attention to separating the laundry. With the white load already under way, she carefully sorted the coloureds.

All upstairs went quiet.

Minutes later, Tom stood in the kitchen doorway, hands in pockets, still pouting.

'Feeling better?' said Linda.

Glaring and silence. Also usual.

'Ca-can I have my say now?' he said.

'Of course you can.' She pulled out a chair and sat at the table. 'I'm listening.'

Tom sat motionless, except for a frantic twisting of his hands, indicative of his heightened state of anxiety. 'I-I've been having a th-think, abou-about what you just said and...I-I don't want you to move out. I-I can't bear to not have you-you here, even temp-or-ar-ily. I...I understand you want to do this, that you feel you h-ave to, and so I've...I've made a de...deshisun.' He raked his fingers vigorously over his scalp. 'Christ, I can't even get the w-words out properly.'

She laid her hand on his arm and hushed him. 'It's alright. Go on. Take your time.'

He took in two deep breaths to steady himself, and swallowed. 'I c.-can't deny that I'm g-gutted, Linda, beyond that, I'm-I'm heartbroken. This whole sit-uation is outside my com-compreh-ension. But I've known you a long time and I-I've loved you and trusted you, and until now, you've n-never let me down. I know what you're like, you're al.-always wanting to help people, and-and I know how you're too easily led by your h-ear so this probably not all your f-ault. I have to take some of the b-lame. Maybe I didn't p-pay you as much attention as you deserved.'

'It's not your—'

'—no interruption!'

She closed her mouth, and he continued. 'Like I said before, I'm not a heartless person, and I can see some value to what you're proposing. I can't say I'm happy with it, far, far from it in fact, but it seems, at first glance, that it might be the right thing - the humane thing - to do, and, God help me, I'll go along with it. I wouldn't want you to ever think me without compassion, or that I would deliberately want a fellow man to suffer...even if he is the bastard fucking my wife behind my back.'

She gave him a soft smile and squeezed his hand. 'I would never think that of you, Tom, and thank you.' She put his hand to her lips, and kissed it.

'But you must promise me on your life—' He narrowed his eyes, '—and on his, that once this is over you will never see him again...I want your solemn oath, Linda.'

'I already said I can't do that. He's my friend. He has no-one. He needs me.'

'I need you!'

'You have me, all the time.'

His lips clamped together and his chin moved from side to side with gritty agitation. She clasped his hand with both of hers.

'Tom, I'll make you a promise, but it comes with a condition.'

'You're not in any position to make conditions.'

'Alright, call it a compromise then.'

He closed his eyes and drew air through his clenched teeth. 'What condition?'

She clutched his hand tighter. 'I promise you I won't sleep with him any more, but you must let me see him whenever I want to, or whenever he wants me to, or whenever he needs me to...as a dear friend?'

'No sex?'

'No sex,' she affirmed. 'A lot of love, because he deserves it, but no sex.'

He held her intense gaze for a long drawn out moment before slowly nodding his agreement.

Chapter 24

'Are you ready?'

Adam, in the chair beside his bed, his bag on his knees, nodded to the waiting nurse.

'We're ready,' said Linda and took hold of the bag as Adam got unsteadily to his feet.

The nurse handed Linda an envelope'

'A letter for his GP.'

And a large paper bag from the pharmacy, filled to bursting.

'And his medicines.'

Linda stuffed them both into the holdall. She'd been through all this before with Tom and knew what to do with them.

Slowly, the trio made their way to the elevator. When the door rattled open, Linda and Adam stepped inside.

'Take care, Mr Strachan,' the nurse smiled. 'We don't want to see you back here again. Bye.'

As the elevator doors closed, she waved and they saw her turn and walk away.

Linda pressed the button for the ground floor. After a few stops between, the elevator set them down in a foyer thronging with people. She looked around.

'There he is.'

She led Adam towards a row of chairs by a vending machine to where Tom sat reading a newspaper.

'Here we are.'

He folded the paper, stood, and the two men eyed each other coolly. Adam, with a frail smile, held out his hand.

'Thank you for doing this, Tom,' he said. 'I'm really very grateful.'

Tom grunted and glanced at Linda. She gave the smallest twitch of her eyebrow, the message unmistakable. He took Adam's hand and gave it the

briefest shake. He then relieved Linda of the burden of Adam's bag.

'Car's this way,' he said, and set off at a brisk pace. She noticed he no longer had any trace of a limp.

She and Adam walked more slowly, their arms linked, him leaning against her for support.

'He's not happy, and I can't say I blame him,' he said. 'I hope you know what you're doing.'

'I am.'

'He looks about ready to smash my face in.'

'Hmmm,' she agreed. 'But at least we are in the right place if does. The Emergency Room is just around the corner.'

They drove home in relative silence. Tom concentrated on driving; Linda stared out of the window, commenting occasionally on something she saw that interested her. Adam, in the rear seat, thumbed through the newspaper.

When they arrived at the house, Tom opened the door, to be met with an avalanche of canine frenzy. Archie ran around in circles, delirious with excitement at their visitor. Finn ambled close behind, merely curious.

'Finn! Old man!'

Adam's gladness at seeing his old friend in such good form brought a wide smile to his still pale face. He crouched down and fussed over his pet, rubbing his face against the dog's soft head. 'Look at you...' He looked up at Tom.

'I can't thank you enough for looking after him. I've been worried sick about him.'

'It wasn't a problem; he's been no trouble at all,' said Tom with all the warmth of a winter's morning in Fraserburgh. 'He's eaten everything we put in front of him, and whatever else he can find, and he sleeps on the sofa with the TV on. That dog's been living the life of Riley for the last three weeks.'

Adam laughed. 'Thanks, pal.'

'I'm not your pal,' said Tom icily. 'Don't ever make that mistake.' He dropped Adam's bag on the sofa on his way to the kitchen.

'Don't worry about him,' said Linda, her hand on Adam's shoulder. 'He'll come round.' She retrieved the bag. 'Come on, I'll show you to your room.'

The bedroom was comfortably appointed, with a double bed, wardrobe, dressing table and bedside table, although the bedding, curtains and cushions were a little chintzy for Adam's taste.

'You should be comfortable enough in here,' Linda said, dropping the bag on the bed. 'The bathroom is just across the landing.' She pointed over her shoulder. 'No en suite in this house I'm afraid.'

'It's most agreeable,' he said. 'Thank you.' He sat on the bed and bounced to tentatively test the firmness of the mattress.

'Will it do?'

'Aye, it's just right.' He affected a strained and nervous smile of appreciation. Linda took his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her.

'It's okay,' she said. 'I know you don't want to be here, and I know how desperately awkward this must feel, but there really was no other choice. The alternative was too horrible to contemplate, and there was no way I was going to let you be on your own.' She kissed his head and tidied his hair. 'If you behave yourself, take your medicines, rest and eat properly, you'll be well in no time and you can go home.'

He dropped his head against her breast and she cradled it there. 'Tom hates me being here.' he said. 'He's only doing it to please you.'

'I know. Poor Tom. He's deeply upset. He feels betrayed and unsure of himself, and me, and with every good reason. But he knows deep down how much I love him and even though I don't regret a single minute of the time I've spent with you, I am sorry I hurt him. You might not be among his favourite people at the moment, or ever, but give it a little time, and things should get

better. Once you get used to each other and get to know each other—'

He looked up at her. 'I admire your confidence,' he said wryly.

She put her hands on his shoulders, felt the tension and massaged them gently.

'It would be so perfect if you two could find a way to get along,' she said.

He rolled his neck against her hands. 'My being here is going to create so many difficulties for you.'

She gave him an encouraging smile. 'I have the two men I love most in the whole world right here, together under my own roof. How could that possibly be construed as a difficulty?'

'I hope you're right. He promised to wring my neck and kick six shades of shit out of me, remember?'

She moved her fingers through his hair. 'If memory serves me right, I think it was seven.' She kissed him again. 'Now, you're not to hide away up here, thinking you'll be in the way, because you won't. You're a guest in this house and you'll be treated as such.'

His brow creased. 'I shouldn't be here—'

She put a finger to his lips. 'What are you?'

'A guest,' he said around it.

'That's right. Now, unpack your stuff and have a rest, and I'll come and get you when it's dinner time, okay?'

Too tired to argue, he could only agree. 'Okay.'

She closed the bedroom door quietly behind her, turning around to find Tom blocking the landing. The expression on his face told her he had heard their whole exchange.

Dinner was difficult. The trio sat around the kitchen table and picked at their meal, with only the barest polite conversation passing between them.

Linda spoke to Tom. Linda spoke to Adam. Tom and Adam did not so much as glance at each other.

She cleared the dinner things away and returned to the table with Adam's medication, overseeing his taking it.

When the men attempted to leave the table, she made them sit down again. She had something to say.

'Now that we are all here together, well fed and reasonably calm, we have a nettle to grasp, painful though it may be. We have to talk about what's going on here.'

She looked around the table at the pokerfaced men, both studying the pattern on the tablecloth.

'Shall I begin?'

Silence.

'Okay then. This is how I think this rather novel and unique situation is going to work so that it suits each of us for the best.'

She directed her next words to her husband. 'Tom, you will continue to go to work at the Castle as if nothing unusual is happening here at all. You will not say anything to your workmates about Adam being here, nor will you malign him, gossip about him or attract any attention to his situation in any way whatsoever. What goes on here is private and nobody's business but our own. Do you understand?'

Tom's face remained stonily impassive. She assumed his lack of argument to be affirmative and pressed on, addressing Adam.

'Adam, for the first week at least you will stay here full time. That way I can keep an eye on you and make sure you take your medicines and eat and rest properly. After that, if I, not you, deem you fit enough, you will only need to spend nights here. You will be free to come and go during the day, so long as you let me know where you will be, and you always carry your mobile phone with you. Okay?'

His face and nod expressed silent agreement.

'It will also be my judgement, not yours, which will determine when you are well enough to return home and look after yourself. Do you agree to that?'

'I do.'

'So far, so good. Any questions?'

Both men shook their heads.

'Right then, there is now only one thing left to do. As acrimony is very stressful and not conducive to healthy healing, from now on you two will at least act like the civilised human beings I take you to be...and I want you to shake on it - properly this time.'

Tom retracted his hands from the tabletop and folded them firmly into his lap. Adam, with a generous spirit of reconciliation held out his hand across the table to his adversary. The two men locked eyes - Tom's brown as hard as pebbles; Adam's soft grey seeking peace. Slowly, Tom brought his right hand out from under the table and extended it. There was a dutiful, token shake followed by a rapid parting.

'Wonderful,' said Linda, laying her own hands on the table, palms up, inviting each man to take one. She grasped at both and one at a time, kissed them.

'Now, Tom, would you be so kind as to break out the *potch ghoo*?

She glanced at Adam to confirm her pronunciation was correct.

Tom looked at her blankly. 'The wha'?'

'The whisky; the Poit Dhubh. I think we need to seal this arrangement with something special, don't you? Although not for you, Adam - antibiotics and alcohol don't mix. Sorry.'

Several measures of the fine blended malt later, with orange squash for Adam, all three sat together on the sofa watching the evening news and sports programme, each man squeezed up to either end in order to be as physically far away from each other as possible, leaving Linda with plenty of space in the middle.

During the commercial break, she got up to go to the lavatory. On her return, she stopped when she reached the bottom of the stairs. Could her ears be deceiving her? The men were talking - to each other.

Music to her ears.

She sidled up to the living room door to eavesdrop on their conversation, not surprised to hear it involved football.

She supposed the whisky had lowered Tom's defences and loosened his tongue, but at least they were not trying to strangle each other, and in her heart, the tiniest, most fragile grain of hope sprouted.

In bed that night, Tom lay still with his back to her. She could tell from the rhythm of his breathing he wasn't asleep.

She slipped her arm around him, her hand on his bare chest, stroking through the hair and kissed the back of his shoulder.

He turned onto his back and then over again. Face to face.

She laid her palm against his cheek and he took it and kissed her fingers. Closer, until she could touch his nose with hers. Nearer still and their lips brushed. A few small exploratory touches ended in a full, enthusiastic kiss.

She stroked her hands over his skin, reacquainting herself with the feel of him. Her hand wandered down his back, over his buttock and thigh to his pubic area, though his mass of coarse curled hair and down to his cock.

Her fingertips moved lightly against the flaccid organ, barely caressing, until it responded to her touch. A few minutes of sweet, sensuous massage, and it filled her whole hand. He moaned softly through the kisses.

Groins touching, she pushed against him, grasping his cock tightly between her thighs.

'Oh Linda!'

Kisses frantic; arousal mounting; excitement growing, until...through the wall from the next room, the muffled sound of Adam's brutal coughing.

'I can't do it,' he said, pulling away and rolling onto his back. 'Not with him in the next room. His just being there is putting me off.'

'It's okay—'

'What if he hears us? You know I like to—'

'He won't.' Linda pulled him back to her. 'Don't think about it; just look at me. Concentrate on us. There's no one here but the two of us.'

'But he *is* here—'

'Shh.' She put her fingers to his lips. 'Let me show you how much I love you, Tom. Despite everything that's happened, my love for you is as strong as it's ever been.'

'I don't want to have to share you, Lindy.'

'Love doesn't run out when it's shared,' she said. 'There's always more than enough to go around. No one gets any less.'

'Prove that you mean it, Lind. Show me it's true. Give yourself back to me.'

She put her lips to his. 'Body...and soul.' She draped her leg over him, opening herself up. With her hand she guided him into her, and with a subtle forward movement, enveloped him. He accepted her invitation, eased her onto her back, and began to push into her.

'There you go,' she whispered. 'You're home now.'

She welcomed him with subtle gyrations of her pelvis and a firm grasp on his buttocks. He began to push faster and deeper into her, her wet heat massaging his cock. He grunted with the effort and his breathing became short sharp gasps as the pressure of impending climax increased in his balls. He pushed harder, faster; began to tremble, until, with a lurch and a shudder, he ejaculated, his balls and penis pulsing and contracting as he ejected not only semen, but all his frustration and rage and resentment.

Energy spent, he finally collapsed onto her breast, trembling and gasping with relief. And there she held him, secure, safe, loved, until his breathing slowed and he relaxed, and fell into sleep.

Chapter 25

Tom tucked into his usual working day breakfast of bacon, sausage, fried eggs and toast, perusing the newspaper as he ate, occasionally slurping at his tea.

Linda rooted out the fold-up wooden tray they used for their breakfast in bed. Onto it she placed another plate of breakfast, a glass of orange juice, a mug of tea and Adam's bottles of medication.

'Why can't he come down and eat at the table,' said Tom, eyeing the tray.

'He had a rough night. You heard him coughing. I bet he hardly slept.'

'You don't have to wait on him hand and foot.'

'I'm not, and stop being so selfish. He's poorly and he needs looking after.'

He scrutinised Adam's plate. 'How come he gets three rashers of bacon and I only get two?'

He's lost a lot of weight while he's been ill and he needs building up again. He needs proper food so stop being petty.'

Tom huffed disdain and stabbed his toast into the yolk of his fried egg, coating it with sticky yellow and stuffed it into his mouth.

'Mmmnnnffffnnnnfff.'

'Yes, alright, you've made it perfectly clear you're not happy with this situation, Tom, and I'm sure Adam would rather be anywhere else but here. But here he is, and we agreed - you agreed, that I'm going to take care of him until he's well enough to look after himself. I know it's a bit strange and you feel left out and neglected...'

He banged his cutlery on the table. 'A bit strange' doesn't even come close, Linda. This is fucking surreal in anybody's books. I can't believe I allowed you to talk me into it! You've brought your lover to live in our house.

What husband in his right mind would allow his wife to do such a thing?'

'One who cares about another human being in trouble, that's who. It's too late to change your mind now. You can't throw him out.'

'I didn't say I was going to, but I'm going to be a laughing stock if the lads at work find out.'

He picked up his knife and fork and continued to rip at his food.

'They won't find out if *you* don't say anything,' she said. 'That's what this strop is really all about, isn't it? Your reputation with the lads?'

'You do know there's a word for men like me, don't you, Lind? I found it on the internet. It's a horrible word...cuckold. It sounds a lot like 'cuckoo' doesn't it? That's what they'll think I am for allowing this debacle—'

'Keep your voice down, Tom.'

'Why should I? What's the matter? Afraid lover boy might hear?' He raised his voice further. 'This is *my* house and I can sodding well shout if I sodding well want to! Okay?'

She in turn kept her voice, low, even and reasonable.

'You can rant and rave to your heart's content, Tom. Feel free, let rip; yell at me until you are blue in the face. I don't care. Have a tantrum if you must, throw things; hit me if it will make you feel any better. Batter me to a pulp, I'll stand here and take it, gladly, whatever it takes for you to leave Adam in peace.'

The passion of her tirade, and the idea he could ever raise a hand to her, horrified him, and it showed in the way he sat rigidly clutching his cutlery, staring fixedly down at his plate.

She rounded the table and crouched beside his chair, her hand on his leg, stroking it affectionately.

'I know you're angry, darling, and you've been extraordinarily tolerant. What we have here is a situation you would only read about in a cheap novel. Please try to understand how deeply I care for Adam, and I want him to be well again, but you are my husband and I love you, and I know how hard this is for

you. A lesser man would surely never even have considered it. Making him feel unwelcome, however, might delay his recovery and none of us want that.' She stood and kissed his head 'You have done a wonderful, compassionate thing, and I am so proud of you.'

He put his arm around her waist and held her protectively close. 'I don't want to leave you alone with him,' he said. 'I'll...worry...'

'Don't. Nothing will happen. Adam is too poorly to do anything but rest. He wouldn't anyway. He appreciates the situation and will behave appropriately. He's a gentleman.'

Tom looked up into her eyes. 'What about you? I can trust you can't I?'

'I gave you my word, didn't I?' She picked up Adam's tray. 'Now finish your breakfast, or you're going to be late for work. I'd better take this up before it gets cold.'

She knocked on the door of Adam's room and after a few moments of coughing and shuffling from within, heard a husky, 'Come in'.

Adam sat on the edge of the bed, fastening the cord of his dressing gown.

'Good morning,' she said, cheerfully. 'How are you feeling today?'

He rubbed at his weary, bloodshot eyes. 'A bit rough to be honest.'

'You didn't get a lot of sleep did you, babe?'

He rolled and rubbed his neck. 'Not much.'

'I heard you coughing in the night.'

'Sorry. Did I keep you awake?'

She showed him the tray. 'I brought you some breakfast. I'm sorry it's so early, but we eat at the crack of dawn when Tom's working.'

Adam pulled a face. 'I'm not really hungry.'

'You need to eat because you have to take your pills with food. Squidge back on the bed and I'll put this over you.'

She dropped the legs on the tray and placed it across his lap. 'If you don't want it all, at least eat the toast.'

She sat on the bed beside him, careful not to rock the tray and spill his tea.

'Are you going to supervise me?' he asked.

'Do I have to?'

He took a sip of the orange juice. 'I heard what you were saying,' he said. 'It came up through the floor; Tom shouting, you upset. I don't want that.'

'He was a little upset, that's all. Don't worry. He got as good as he gave.'

'This state of affairs is not going to work, Linda. He is furious with you, and even more furious with me, and I can't help but feel that one or more of us is going to end up very badly hurt...and I don't want it to be you.'

'He'll come round.'

'I doubt it. In the name of sanity, Linda, what man allows his wife to bring another man to live under the same roof, and leaves them alone together all day to get up to God knows what?'

'You're in no condition to get up to anything, matey.'

She wrestled the child-proof top from the bottle of antibiotics, shook two capsules into Adam's hand, and replaced the cap.

'If I remember my history correctly, Lady Emma Hamilton did exactly the same thing with Lord Nelson after he was wounded in some battle or other,' she said, watching closely as he swallowed the pills with a gulp of the juice. 'She was still married to Sir William Hamilton, and they all lived happily together at her family home until Nelson was recovered. So it would seem we are in much esteemed company.'

'Tom won't see it that way.'

'You leave Tom to me, and just concentrate on getting well.' She stood. 'Now, finish your breakfast and stay in bed as long as you like.' She bent to kiss his cheek. 'I'll see Tom off to work, and if you're up to it, we'll decide later what to do with the rest of the day, okay?'

He nodded his agreement and thanks, and watched her leave, pausing to listen to her footsteps as she trotted down the stairs.

She saw Tom on his way to work with a kiss of encouragement. She didn't see Adam again until lunchtime.

After managing only half his breakfast, he had lain back on the bed and dozed off again, his almost sleepless night having left him exhausted.

'Feeling better,' she said, when he came downstairs, still in his pyjamas and dressing gown and carrying the breakfast tray.

'A bit.'

'Do you want some lunch?'

'No thanks.'

Linda's sideways look told him that was the wrong answer, and he took the hint. 'Well, maybe a sandwich, if it's no trouble?'

They sat together at the kitchen table, their food and drink before them. Both dogs sat in close attention, awaiting dropped titbits, ignored as their two humans became engrossed in deep conversation.

After half an hour, Linda had said her piece and Adam had listened, understood and agreed. Held in her soft, comforting embrace, he felt more reassured about Tom not sneaking into his room in the middle of the night and smothering him with a pillow, or lacing his tea with hemlock.

'It's going to be challenging,' she said. 'Be patient, try and be nice and don't do anything to antagonise him. Leave him to me, and everything will be hunky dory in no time. Trust me.'

He did trust her; he had no choice but to. He was in no situation to argue. He had no strength to argue. He could do nothing but sit back and accept whatever unfolded, and allow her to defend him and take care of him.

If Tom focused his anger on him, he would have to take it like a man; be contrite and humble and apologetic in response and hope it would blow over without too many bruises. He would endure his enforced recuperation by staying out of the way as best he could

- minimal contact would allow for minimal confrontation.
Out of sight, out of mind.

The situation would not last for ever, but while it did,
he would at least enjoy Linda's undivided attention.

Chapter 26

'Where do you want to go?'

Linda turned the key the back door, locking it securely.

'I think we should go to the cottage first,' Adam said. 'We can pick up the post and then we can have a wander up the path to the wood.'

'That sounds good. Ready when you are. Easy does it.'

Adam had been staying at Linda's home for six days and settled in well. She had taken good care of him, and his condition had improved markedly. His breathing came easier and his cough no longer produced the unpleasant coloured phlegm, instead it became merely dry and annoying.

Considering he had spent too much time indoors, and as the weather was fine and reasonably warm, he suggested it might be time he took some exercise. He asked Linda to accompany him, not that she would have let him go alone, and both dogs were more than happy to tag along with them.

Finn's health had also improved. Adam had been forced to admit that the conditions endured in the cellar of the Castle had contributed heavily to both their illnesses and now they had been relieved of their objectionable living situation, both were benefiting.

Not only had Adam's physical condition recovered, his relationship with Tom also seemed to have taken a turn for the better. Linda managed to hold sway over her husband and he seemed convinced now that her love for him remained undiminished, and Adam no longer presented a threat to their marriage.

The two men also no longer regarded each other with frigid silence. Linda's affection for them both acted as a

catalyst, quietly encouraging a subtle respect between them.

The two humans and two dogs piled into Linda's Volvo, and she drove them to Adam's cottage.

While he'd languished in hospital, she'd called into the cottage every other day to collect the mail. She hadn't been while he stayed with her, although there wasn't much behind the door to be picked up, mostly circulars and a few official looking letters.

He binned the junk mail and pocketed the letters to read later. He searched in a drawer in the kitchen to find his chequebook and pocketed that too.

'Everything looks okay,' she said having come down from checking the upstairs. 'Do you want to stay a while longer or shall we go?'

'We can go now.'

With the cottage securely locked up, the party set off to walk up the track at the rear of the property leading to the Oak Wood. Although not yet able to bound, Finn nevertheless managed keep up a decent pace. Archie, as usual, ran around as if the very hounds of Hell were chasing his tail.

When they reached the massive Heart of the Oak Wood, Adam leaned against it, only slightly out of breath.

'Hello, old friend,' he said, stroking his hand over the bark.

'You really love this old tree, don't you?' said Linda running her own hand over the rough wood.

'It deserves to be loved. It's beautiful and strong, and although not eternal, it will be here long after we've all gone. It's amazing to think that this tree was already fully grown when my great-great- grandfather lived at the Castle.'

She craned her neck to peer into the leafy canopy and the first faint tinges of yellow.

'The leaves are turning early. Autumn's just around the corner.' She pulled down a nearby branch. 'Ooh look, acorns are starting.'

'At least the squirrels will eat well,' said Adam. 'Look at this.'

She went to see. He showed her a mark carved into the tree's trunk. She looked closely and could make out three initials: AMS, and a date.

'I did that when I was seven,' he said. 'I was given a penknife for my birthday and that's the first thing I did with it.'

'You little vandal.' She traced her finger over the letters. 'AMS, Adam M Strachan, what does the M stand for?'

'Munro.'

'A Scotsman through and through?'

'To the very marrow,' he laughed. 'It's stamped through me like a stick of seaside rock.' He leaned his back against the tree trunk and slid down onto his haunches, before dropping down to the dry soft earth, his legs out in front of him. He patted his lap and she sat on it, her arms around his neck holding onto his collar.

'Remember the first time you did that?' he said.

'When I got stuck on the fence.'

'You thought I was just after a quick grope.'

'Were you?'

'Of course. You've got to take them where you can.'

'Do you want one now?' She grabbed his hand and placed it on her buttock.

'What will Tom say if he catches me with my hand on your arse?' He gave her backside a light squeeze.

'What the eye doesn't see, the heart cannot grieve over.'

She took off his cap and ran her fingers through his hair, stroked her hand down his cheek, before brushing his face with her lips. Their resulting kiss was strong and full of passion.

'You shouldn't do that,' he protested, yet loathe for her to stop.

'I can't help it, no matter what promise I've made to Tom, I love you too much not to kiss you.' She touched her lips to his again. 'I didn't promise I wouldn't kiss you.'

'What promise did you make?'

Her head dipped slightly. 'One I don't intend to keep.'

He lifted her chin to look into her face. 'What did you promise, Linda?'

She sucked air in through her teeth and exhaled. 'I made a bargain with him. In exchange for being allowed to see you purely as a friend...I swore on my life, and yours, that I would never sleep with you again.'

He pushed back a stray strand of her hair. 'If you gave your promise, you have to keep it.'

She moved her head slowly from side to side. 'No I don't. I didn't mean it when I made it, so it doesn't count.'

'It always counts. You lied to Tom.'

'I didn't have a choice. He would have tried to make me abandon you completely, and as much as I love him, I love you as much, and I will never give you up until you say so.' She put both her hands to his neck. 'Do you want me give you up, Adam?'

He pressed his eyes closed and his brow creased as if he were in pain. After a moment, he inhaled sharply and shook his head.

'No,' he gasped, his eyes burning with urgency. 'No, I do not.'

He clasped her face in his hands and his kiss was so desperately intense, Linda found herself fighting for breath.

'You know Tom will kill me if he finds out what we've just done,' said Adam, his arm around Linda's shoulders as she rested her head on his chest.

'He won't find out. I won't tell him, you won't tell him and I'm pretty sure the dogs won't say a word.'

'Is it worth the risk? You swore on my life remember.'

She twisted her head to look at him. 'Are you having second thoughts?'

'No, it's too late for that, but I am still a wee bit afraid of what Tom might do to me. I'm not fond of pain.'

She sat up, straddling his thighs, her bright eyes looking down into his. 'Tom's all emotion and noise,' she

said. 'He'll rant and he'll rage and he'll throw things, he may even smash your windows in, but he won't physically hurt you. And if we are careful, there is no risk.' She twisted his arm to look at his wristwatch and let out a deep groan. 'Time to go,' she said scrambling off his lap. 'Come on, make yourself decent.'

Adam buttoned up his shirt and tucked it into his trousers, zipping them up securely. She adjusted her panties, and he swept his hand over her backside and down her long skirt, brushing away clinging leaf litter and earth. When they were both cleaned off and looking respectable, they set off down the path to return to his cottage.

'Wait a minute,' he said when they arrived, and drew his keys from his pocket. He climbed into the Land Rover, still parked at the rear of the cottage, inserted and turned the key. The motor whirred sluggishly before catching.

'At least the battery wasn't completely flat.'

He revved it a few times, blowing out a cloud of acrid blue smoke. He then got out, leaving the rattling diesel engine ticking over, unlocked the back door of the cottage and stepped inside.

'There's something important I need to take with me back to your house. I'll drive the Land Rover up and park it in the back lane. You take the Volvo home; I'll follow on in a while.'

Linda waited anxiously at the house for Adam to return. As promised he parked in the lane, and she went out to help him with his load; some clothes and essential items stuffed into an old duffle bag, which he passed to her, and a long, steel case pulled out from the back of the Land Rover.

'What on earth's that?' she asked.

'The shotgun and ammunition. I can't leave them in an unoccupied house. It's too dangerous. I should have asked you to collect it when I was in hospital, but I forgot. If someone had broken in—'

'I can't have them in the house. Tom will go spare,' she protested.

'I can't leave them. It's against the law.'

Linda grunted her surrender. 'Okay, put them in the cupboard under the stairs. If I put a coat over them, he might not notice.'

Tom arrived home after work that evening to find Linda preparing dinner and Adam stretched out on the sofa watching TV, looking for all the world like the recuperating invalid he was.

He greeted his wife with a full and passionate kiss to the lips, and she was astounded to hear him say, 'Okay mate?' to Adam as he passed through the living room to the hallway to hang his coat in the closet under the stairs.

'What's this, Lind?' he called.

'What's that, babe?'

'This tin box; it wasn't here before. What is it?'

Linda put her head around the kitchen door; Adam sat up and looked over the back of the sofa. They exchanged glances.

'It's mine,' said Adam. 'I hope you don't mind. It's something I brought from the cottage for safekeeping.'

Tom eyed the box with curiosity and fingered the combination lock. 'It must be something valuable to warrant a fancy lock like this.'

'It's Adam's personal stuff,' chided Linda. 'Mind your own business.'

'No, it's okay,' Adam interjected. 'I've brought something into your home and he has a right to know. It's a shotgun and ammunition, Tom. I have a duty to keep them safe. I hope you don't mind.'

Tom's eyebrows rose. Then, with a tremor of excitement in his voice, he said something which made Linda stare in astonishment. 'We saw you with a gun, that day in the woods. Would you mind if I have a look?'

Adam's reply added to her wonder. 'Sure. Nae problem.'

Tom heaved the box out of the closet and dropped it on the sofa, and Adam carefully entered the combination and slid the thumb catches aside. At the sight of the weapon, in three separate pieces encased in the foam interior of the box, Tom's face lit up, like a child regarding a shiny new train set on Christmas morning.

'Cool!' he exclaimed. 'Can I hold it?'

Adam took each of the pieces of the gun from the box and assembled them. Out of habit, he checked the gun was empty, snapped it closed and handed the weapon to a beaming Tom.

'You wouldn't let me hold it,' complained Linda returning to her vegetables.

Tom turned the gun over in his hands. 'It's heavier than it looks,' he said. 'Beautiful construction. What ammunition do you use?'

Adam fished a black and silver cartridge from the box and tossed it over. Tom examined it with interest before handing it back.

Before Linda's eyes, as Adam demonstrated the correct use of the weapon, the glacier between the two men began to melt. Soon the conversation strayed from guns and shooting and on to angling. Adam, it transpired, had been a keen angler in the past. Tom said he had always been interested, and was keen to give it a try. They agreed they would approach it together, one as tutor, the other as pupil. They then moved on from the pursuit of fish and game, through football to finally end up on Tom's favourite subject - cars.

With a smile brightening her face, Linda listened to everything as she carried on with the preparation of the evening meal. The men's animated discussion continued throughout dinner and Linda, for once, found herself relegated to the sideline.

Chapter 27

Tom went off to work each morning with a goodbye kiss from his wife. Adam often went his own way with Finn in the Land Rover, returning to the house mid-afternoon, but always in time for dinner. Some days he stayed home on the pretext of helping Linda with her domestic chores.

'I've added to her workload,' he told Tom. 'It's the very least I can do.'

Chores completed, the couple would reward their hard work by passing the afternoon making love in his bed.

She welcomed her husband home each evening with a kiss and a hot meal, and almost every night, if he was not too tired from work, welcomed him into herself.

When the weekends came around, Adam agreed to stay out of the way while Tom and Linda spent quality time together. She had given him a house key to allow him to let himself in and out at will.

He would leave the house early on Saturday morning and not return until late on Sunday afternoon.

As she cleared away the plates after dinner one evening, Tom had a surprise for him.

'Something turned up at work today,' he said, rummaging in his backpack. 'One of the lads found this under a loose floorboard in the top room in the tower. I rescued it from the skip. I thought you might know what it was.'

Onto the table he placed a battered oblong tin box with a hinged lid. The paint had rusted and peeled, but the word 'biscuits' remained legible. Adam took it in his hands and looked at it closely, a wistful expression on his face.

'What is it?' said Linda, collecting up the cruet and place mats.

'It's...er, something long forgotten.' He tugged at the lid. Rusted shut, it would not budge.

'Here, use this,' said Tom, and handed Adam a screwdriver from his pack.

Using the tool as a lever, he carefully prised the lid open and poked through the contents with his fingers, before tipping the little collection of oddments out onto the tablecloth - two miniature toy cars, one green, one blue; a set of once collectible brightly coloured enamel badges depicting gollywogs in a variety of guises; a selection of coins no longer in circulation; six lead soldiers in full battle dress, and bound in a frayed elastic band, a small stack of cigarette cards portraying cricketers from around the world.

'The top room in the tower was my playroom,' he said. 'I hid this under the floorboards from my brother, David. He was always after my stuff. It's funny, I thought they were treasures at the time...'

'Treasures from your childhood?' said Linda, picking up the blue car and turning its tiny wheels. 'How totally charming.'

He held up the green one and picked open the little doors. Dragging a shuddering sigh from the very depths of him, he closed them again and put the toy back in the tin.

'Aye, but it's all gone now,' he murmured, and propping his elbows on the table, put his face in his hands. A fleeting glimpse up at Linda gave Tom his instruction.

Quietly, he left the table and she slipped into his vacated seat, her hand immediately reaching for Adam's.

From the living room, Tom watched furtively as she and her friend huddled together and Adam wiped at his eye with the heel of his hand. The box and the memories invoked by it had upset him, and Linda had moved to comfort him.

Tom recognised every nuance of her consoling manner, she had used them on him many times in the past – the familiar gentle stroke of her hand across his shoulders; moving it from the back of his neck and into his hair, brushing through it with her fingers; the

closeness of her face and the intense look in her blue eyes as she whispered words of comfort and encouragement. Compassion and love flowed from her in an almost visible stream. He identified all the signs and reached his conclusion – Linda genuinely and profoundly did love Adam Strachan, about it there was now no doubt in his mind at all.

He knew now that what she had told him all along had been the truth. It was possible for her to love both of them at the same time, without lessening the supply of love to either, a fact being corroborated before his eyes.

As he witnessed the exquisite togetherness of the couple, he became aware of a strange sensation, something he wasn't expecting. Where there should have been a writhing pit of jealous rage at the sight of his wife and her lover together in such a display of intimacy, he felt instead a surge of sympathy and pity for Adam and his plight. He urged himself to will up the tiniest amount of resentment toward the man accepting Linda's touch, but none would come. For his wife he felt the same all encompassing love he always had since the first moment they met - he loved her with his very soul - and because he did, he made his decision to give his blessing to their friendship. To have Linda love him as she did, he considered Adam Strachan to be a lucky man indeed.

He saw Adam nod his head and Linda push back her chair, their poignant conversation at an end. The pair stood, and after an exchange of brief kisses, Adam left the room to go upstairs. Linda tucked her chair back under the table and looked through the doorway at the watching Tom. She smiled at him, and he realised she was returning the smile already sitting on his own lips.

'Is he okay?' he asked, his enquiry genuine.

'He will be.' She put her arms around her husband, hugging him close.

The next day the rain fell in stair rods, and rather than allow Tom to cycle to work and endure a soaking, Adam offered to drive him to his work at the Castle in

the Land Rover and to pick him up again at the end of the day. Tom gratefully accepted the offer, a simple act of generosity, yet one which brought about a sea change in their relationship.

'He's not really a bad bloke,' said Tom to a dumbfounded Linda as he helped her clear away the dinner things. 'Not bad at all.'

Not yet as close as brothers, the two men were getting along without any hint of malice or recrimination

At the end of two more weeks, Linda declared Adam fit enough to return to his own home and take care of himself. She agreed to visit him at least once a day to ensure he had a square meal and had taken his medicines. The 'once' often extended from mid-morning until half an hour before Tom's time due home from work.

It took more than another month before Adam regained full fitness, except for a residual tickling cough which proved to be no more than a petty annoyance. He visited his doctor regularly for check-ups, his medicines were discontinued and he moved back into the cottage full time. His normal everyday activities, including patrolling of his beloved Oak Wood soon resumed.

With Tom's sanction, Linda continued her daily visits because her relationship with Adam would be, as she vowed, purely platonic, and he trusted her to keep her word.

Chapter 28

Linda woke early one morning to the disturbing feeling of something vitally important nagging at the back of her mind, yet refusing to be pinned down.

'It'll come to me if I don't think about it,' she told herself as she traipsed into the bathroom.

After urinating, she washed her hands, using the last sliver of soap.

New bar? Bathroom cabinet.

It was then she noticed her unopened packet of tampons, and the hammer fell.

She raced downstairs to the kitchen, to the current month's page on the wall calendar. The month was almost at an end, and the day she expected to be marked with a red cross already long ago been and gone. She went back another month. There was the red cross, where it was supposed to be, three days in.

She pressed her hand over her mouth, stifling a small whimper.

'Is that alright, babe?'

Silence.

'Babe?'

Vacant eyes set in a pale tight face looked back at Tom. 'What?'

'I said, is it alright if I go to the pub with some of the blokes from work tonight? It's Aiden's birthday. First round's on him.'

'Yes, sure, you go.'

'Are you okay? You were away with the fairies there.'

'Everything's fine.' She added a small false smile of reassurance.

'Good.' He put his breakfast things in the sink and kissed her briefly on the head. 'I'll just nip to the loo, and then I'm off, okay.'

Although she knew the house would be empty, she called out to be sure. Silence replied, broken only by the tick of the mantle clock,

She went upstairs to the bathroom. Sitting on the closed toilet lid, she opened the paper bag bearing the village pharmacy logo, and took out a pink box. Her hands were shaking as she tipped the contents into her lap – instruction leaflet and a foil packet.

She gave the leaflet a quick read through, before ripping open the foil pack and taking from it a simple plastic stick with two round windows, a simple, inoffensive looking item which could, in just over five minutes, determine the futures of three people.

She took the clear cap off the device, and sat on the toilet, waited, but try as she might, she could pass not a single drop of urine.

'Just one, for God's sake! It's all I need!'

Nothing.

Frustrated, she recapped the test and put it back into the box, hiding it in the depths of a folded towel on the shelf.

Even though she drank coffee and tea throughout the day, it still did not have the desired effect, not until after she made love with Tom that night.

As she sat on the toilet, test in hand, waiting for her bladder to empty itself, a thought occurred to her. She assumed, incorrectly, that if her urine were contaminated with semen, it might render the test useless. She put the test aside again to wait until morning and do it properly with a clean sample.

She rose early after a sleepless night. Tiptoeing out of the bedroom, taking care not to wake Tom, she locked herself in the bathroom and retrieved the test kit from its hiding place. She was ready this time.

A small stream of urine flowed and she dipped the absorbent end of the stick into it. She then held the test in her hand, hardly daring to look at it.

Five minutes stretched into an eternity, until a faint purple line began to form in the first window.

'Just one line,' she prayed, her heart racing.
'Please...just one line.'

Before her horrified eyes, in the other window, a second line began to form.

Chapter 29

Linda climbed down off the examination table behind the modesty screen and adjusted her clothing, as Dr Melanie Weir washed her hands at the small basin.

'I'm pleased to confirm that your home test was correct, Mrs Lewis,' she said as she dried her hands on a paper towel. You are indeed pregnant. Take a seat.'

Linda sat. It had been four days since the pregnancy test. In that time she had made and cancelled two appointments to see Dr Weir, but finally she summoned up the courage to go, every moment hoping and praying that her test had been faulty...or wrong.

Dr Weir sat in a functional leather chair behind an equally functional plain office desk and tapped on her computer keyboard.

'I would say you're no more than about six or seven weeks along, although it is, generally speaking, guesswork at this stage,' she said. 'Conception doesn't work to a timetable, so it could be a few days out either way. The scans will be more definitive as far as dates are concerned. I'll see if I can arrange one for you, you'll bear with me for a moment...'

Linda took that moment to gaze out of the window to the wooded grounds beyond, to work back in her mind, to remember every day since Adam had moved in with them – eight weeks ago.

Six or seven weeks?

Tom had staked his claim to her practically every night Adam had been in their house, no doubt as a method of overcoming his insecurities, and from sheer determination and quantity of sex, chances were the baby would be his. But, there had also been the time in the Oak Wood, the day she broke her oath to Tom and made love with Adam under the Heart Oak. Could it have happened then? Or could it have been during one

of their many other illicit sessions while Tom was out at work?

Could the baby possibly be Adam's?

All the while doctor had been tapping quietly on her computer keyboard.

'Have you been feeling alright? Have you had any morning sickness or unexplained tiredness?' she said, drawing Linda back into the room.

'Um...no. Nothing.'

'Any tenderness in your breasts?'

'No.'

'Hmm. I wouldn't discount it yet, it's still early.'

She pecked the keyboard again. 'Okay. I've arranged for your ante-natal checkups to be done here. It will save you all that travelling to and fro to the hospital. We can do your scans here too. I'll book you in for that at about ten weeks.'

Silence.

The doctor lifted her eyes from the computer screen and looked at her patient with an air of professional concern.

'Forgive me, but you seem a little distracted, Linda. I take it this wasn't a planned pregnancy?'

Linda clasped her hands together in her lap to stop them shaking. 'No, we never *planned* for a child. We determined it would be Nature's gift, to be given to us when we were ready.'

'And now it's happened.'

'Yes.'

'And you're not ready.'

'No.'

'It must have come as quite a shock. I can well understand.'

'It's not just that. Things are...complicated—' Pause. 'There's every chance the baby is not my husband's.'

Dr Weir nodded wisely. 'Ah, I see.'

She leaned forward on her desk, creating an intimacy between herself and her patient.

'What do you want to do, Linda?' she asked gently.

'What do you mean?'

'It's very early, so you do have choices at this stage.'

Linda settled her eyes on the doctor's face. 'I don't want an abortion, if that's what you're getting at.'

'I can only offer you options, Linda. Which one you choose is entirely up to you, but I must warn you, should you choose that particular option, there is a time limit.'

'I will not be choosing it, so you can forget it!'

'Understood.'

Linda sagged further into her chair. 'Sorry, doctor. I didn't mean to be rude.'

'It's okay.'

Weir sat back in her chair. 'You say you are unsure as to whom the baby's father might be.'

'It's a simple fifty fifty split.'

'There are tests we can do to find out for certain,' Weir said. 'It's not absolutely straightforward though. They are expensive, risky and could harm the baby, even cause miscarriage. The main drawback to be considered, the one which can cause most problems, is that under the law we need written consent from the potential fathers to carry out the tests, and blood samples from both of them.'

'Leaving one ecstatic and the other destroyed.'

'Possibly, but at least *you* would know.'

'At the expense of others? No. It's too high a price to pay.'

'What about the baby? Doesn't it have a right to know its parentage?'

'A child should be able to live its own life, irrespective of who its father is.'

'You still have a little bit of time to think about it, although if you leave it longer than about eighteen weeks we can't do it, and you will have to wait until the baby is born.'

'Thank you doctor, but no.'

The doctor nodded. 'Okay, it's your choice, but if you change your mind, or if you need to talk to someone or need some more advice, I can arrange some counselling

for you. You don't have to decide anything by yourself. We are here to help.'

'I don't need—' Too harsh. She softened her tone. 'Thank you doctor, you've been very kind and given me a lot to think about.'

She offered a small smile of apology and got to her feet, bringing the appointment to an end. Weir also rose and rounded the desk to show her out.

'We'll send you an appointment card in the post.'

'Thank you.'

She opened the door. 'You take care, Linda. Bye bye.'

Linda made her way through Reception, out through automatic doors which slid soundlessly open at her approach, and across the car park to her vehicle. Once inside, with the rain drumming on the roof and wind stripped autumnal leaves being plastered against the windows, she sat quite still, hands resting against her flat abdomen. She stroked it gently.

'Well, this is a fine mess we've got ourselves into, isn't it?' she said, addressing the microscopic foetus within her. 'Who's your daddy, eh?'

A redundant question. She already knew the answer.

The rain coursed its way down the windscreen, blurring the outside and she stared through it while she turned thoughts over in her mind.

What to do. Where to go. What to say.

After ten minutes contemplation, she turned the ignition key and started the engine, pressing buttons on the dashboard to set the wipers and demister to work on clearing her vision. She fastened her seatbelt and put the car into gear and set off towards Adam's cottage.

Chapter 30

'Linda? What are you doing here?'

'I had to see you, Adam. You're not busy are you?'

'Just checking the ads to see if anyone wants to hire an experienced estate manager and pay him an extortionate amount in wages for the privilege.'

'Do they?'

'Not yet. Come on in.' He opened the door wide allowing her to pass into the still sparsely furnished sitting room. Orange flames danced behind the glass panels of the stove door and comfortable warmth radiated into the room. Finn lay stretched out on the hearth rug. He fleetingly lifted his head, flicked his tail once in a lazy slap of greeting, before collapsing back to his idleness.

Adam helped Linda off with her coat and motioned her to one of the tatty armchairs from the Castle kitchen while he hung it on the staircase newel post.

'Sit down,' he said, picking his newspaper out of the chair. 'Tea...or something stronger?'

'Tea would be nice, thank you.'

'To what do I owe the pleasure of your company on this rainy autumn afternoon?' he called through the adjoining door as he set the kettle to boil.

Silence.

'Linda?' He peered back through the doorway. 'I said—'

She was doubled over in the chair with her face in her hands and the shaking of her shoulders left him in no doubt she was crying.

He knelt down on the floor in front of her. 'What is it, Lind. What's wrong? Has something happened to Tom?'

She shook her head, brushing away tears with her hand. 'No, Tom's okay. There's nothing wrong with him...it's me.'

He searched her anxious wet eyes. 'What's the matter? Tell me. You're not sick are you?'

'No,' she sniffed. 'Quite the opposite.'

'I don't understand. You're crying because you're not ill?'

'No. Oh, Adam, you're going to be so angry with me.'

'I won't know until you tell me, but whatever it is, it can't be that bad.'

'Yes, it can.'

She pulled a tissue from her pocket to wipe her eyes and blow her nose, and leave him hanging.

'For God's sake, woman, tell me straight.'

Silence.

'Linda!'

'I'm pregnant!' she blurted.

Adam gaped at her. 'Pregnant? As in...having a...baby?'

'That's what it usually means.'

'Oh...God.' The strength gone from his legs, he sat heavily on the floor and wiped his hands across his face, stunned.

'How the hell did that happen?'

'How do you think?'

'I know how, I mean is it...who's—?'

'It's yours.'

He gulped audibly. 'Are you...are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'Does Tom know?'

'Not yet.' She laid her hand against his head, stroking his hair. 'I wanted to tell you first.'

'What...what are you going to say to him? Are you going to tell him it's mine...?'

'No!' She put her cold palm against his warm cheek. 'I can't. It would destroy him. After everything that's happened over the last few months he's already skirting pretty close to the edge. Knowing the baby I'm carrying is not his would just tip him over.'

They sat in silence until, from the kitchen, the kettle whistled.

Adam got to his feet. 'I'll make that tea.
You...um...you rest there.'

Making a simple pot of tea should only take a minute or two, not more than five.

'How're you doing, Adam? Need some help?'

Silence.

She got up. 'You okay?'

There was no tea, only water spilled over the worktop, the teapot on its side, and Adam, leaning against the worktop with his head bowed, his shoulders slumped and heaving.

'Oh, sweetheart.'

She put her arms tightly around his waist and rested her cheek against his back to feel a chain of quiet unrestrained sobs run through him.

Roles reversed, Linda made the tea and took it through to where Adam sat in the living room. She handed him a mug.

'Are you alright now, darling?'

Adam, eyes still red rimmed, smiled wanly up to her.

'Aye. It was the shock. Kicked me right in the teeth. I'm sorry.'

She sat. 'It was my fault. I sat in the car at the doctor's and planned out what I wanted say and how to say it, but when it came to it, I got all tongue tied instead.'

'How long have you known...about the baby?'

'I suspected a few days ago, but I've only known officially for about an hour and a half.'

'How far along are you?'

'The doctor says only six or seven weeks...give or take a day or two either way.'

'And you are sure the baby's mine?'

She blew on her drink. 'Almost positive.'

'Only almost. So there's some element of doubt?'

'Only the tiniest one. What a scientist might call statistically insignificant.'

She took a careful sip of the hot liquid. 'Tom and I have never really been actively trying for a baby. We thought Nature would take her course and it would happen when it happened. It didn't. We haven't had any tests, didn't think we needed to. We have a pretty active sex life which meant we were bound to be blessed sooner or later, so there is always the chance the baby *might* be his, but going on past results, I'm not willing to put money on it. I did perhaps think at one time he might be...infertile.'

Adam stared into his cup. 'You know what he'll do if he even suspects the baby might not be his?'

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'He'll go right off his rocker.'

'Is there any chance he'll take it out on you...punish you...because if there is, I—'

'No, never; he won't touch me, he never has. You don't need to worry about that. And now that I'm pregnant, I will be safer than ever. You can put that right out of your mind.'

He gave a low scornful snicker. 'No, he's going to kill *me* instead...slowly and painfully. Maybe it would be wisest if I stay a long way out of his reach...do you think a fishing boat in the Antarctic will far enough?'

'I doubt it, and running away is probably the worst thing you could do, the one thing that's bound to make him suspicious. If I tell him I'm pregnant, and you happen to disappear off the scene at the same time, he'll put two and two together and make eleven. When I break the news, it's going to be as much a surprise to you as it will be to him. You will both be thrilled...and then we all carry on as if it is the most natural thing in the world.'

'That is not going to be easy.' He dragged his hand over his mouth and chin. 'What if it slips out? Just one wrong word spoken in haste, or by accident, or during an argument, and it's goodnight Vienna.' He drew his fingers in a slashing motion across his throat.

'Then we shall just have to be extra, extra careful, won't we?' she said.

He paused for a long moment, rubbing his brow as he thought. Presently he let out a deep, pensive sigh. 'Aye. Normally I don't agree with deception, particularly of this magnitude, considering what's involved,, but under the circumstances, I think you're right. Let Tom think the baby is his. It's the best thing for all of us. Forget you ever said it was mine. I never knew.'

She reached over and touched his arm. 'I still want you involved...as a supportive friend. I don't think I can go through with it without you.'

'I can do that, without a doubt,' he said. 'I'll hover casually, somewhere in the background, and keep an eye on things. I'll make myself available if you need me, but I won't interfere or make any trouble in any way. You have my word.'

She put down her cup, sat on his chair arm and cradled his head to her, burying her face in his hair.

'Oh Adam, thank you.'

'It goes against all my principles, but I'm not just doing it for you or Tom. I'm doing it for me, because I value my bones and teeth...and because I'm not keen to see the inside of a hospital again any time soon.'

She kissed his head. 'I do love you. You do know that, don't you, you dear, sweet man?'

He lifted his face to her. 'Aye, I do...I do indeed.'

She felt her stomach lurch when she saw Tom's bicycle propped against the wall under the kitchen window; she wasn't expecting him home for another hour or more. A smile pasted on her face, she let herself in through the rear door.

'Hi sweetheart, you're home early,' she said brightly as she kicked off her shoes and removed her jacket. 'Been sacked?'

Silence.

'I haven't started tea yet,' she said, drawing herself a glass of water and taking a long drink from the dripping tumbler.

'Where have you been?' he said, leaning against the worktop, arms folded.

'I popped in to see Adam.'

'Why?'

'Just to see if he was okay.'

'Is he?'

'He's fine. He was searching the classifieds looking for a job.'

She rinsed the empty glass under the tap and put it on the drainer.

'You feeling alright?' he said.

'Fine.'

'Not feeling sick or anything?'

'No. I'm perfectly—'

He placed something in the middle of the table and stood back to watch as the crushed, pink box unfurled itself like an oblong flower.

He then turned his gaze on Linda, eyes glittering like faceted brown stones set in a clay mask.

She swallowed hard. 'Where did you find that?'

'You know very well where I found it, Lind...in the rubbish where you put it. A quick rummage in the bin looking for a lost lottery ticket...and what did I find?'

Silence.

'Well?' he said.

'Well what?'

'Is there something you want to tell me?'

'Do I need to? You obviously know what it is.'

'Yes, I do. I can read. So say it, Linda. Tell me. I want to hear it out loud...from your own lips. Where have you been this morning?'

Her eyes met his, her mouth suddenly very dry. His scrutiny of her didn't waver as he waited for her to speak.

She licked her lips. 'I've been to the doctor's.'

'And?'

She hesitated, the words jammed tight in her throat. 'I'm...I'm pregnant.'

His unblinking brown gaze continued. 'Is it mine?'

'Of course it is.'

'How can you be sure?'

'I am.'

'How - do - you - know?' He enunciated each word as if translating for a foreigner.

Linda tried to keep her voice steady and confident as she concocted her story.

'Remember that time we had an argument when Adam moved in, and you were upset? Remember we had make-up sex and you were pretty forceful and came like a bull?'

Don't think too hard, Tom. Be flattered, but don't try and work it out.

'Yeah,' he said slowly.

'Doctor Weir says that ties in nicely with the dates.'

'Not his...not Adam's?' he asked after a pause, yet in the same suspicious measured monotone.

'No, and for three reasons. Firstly, the timing is all wrong. Secondly, he's been too ill to even think about sex let alone manage it. Finally, I made you a solemn promise I wouldn't sleep with him—'

'And you kept that promise?'

She lifted her chin confidently as she lied through her teeth. 'Yes.'

He snatched her face in her hands, holding it so tightly she could hardly breathe, and held it a mere inch from his own.

'Swear to me, Linda. Swear to me on this baby's life that it's mine. SWEAR!'

She grasped at his wrists and eased his hands away. 'I swear.'

He looked intently into her eyes, searching for any sign of dishonesty. She made sure he found none.

He let her go, and a broad, boyish grin spread across his face. He suddenly seized her around the waist and lifted her off the ground.

'About fucking time! After six bloody years! Oh, thank you GOD!'

He spun her around and around, whooping his happiness, and then he put her down and kissed her long and deep.

'I'm going to be a dad. Oh, Lind...you have no idea how much I love you.' He kissed her again. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I only found out for sure this morning,' she said.

He let go of her and stepped away, his eyes once more full of distrust. 'This morning? Where the hell have you been all day?'

'I told you. I've been at the doctor's, and then I had lunch with Adam.'

'And you told him? You shared the best news in the world with him before you told me?'

'No, sweetheart, I didn't say anything to him. I never said a word. We just had lunch.'

She amazed herself with the ease the lies fell from her mouth.

Tom grabbed the crushed box off the table and waved it at her. 'If I hadn't found this in the rubbish, when were you going to tell me?'

Her mind grappled for any excuse. 'I was going to do something special...to make you a nice meal with candles and wine...and then...surprise!'

'Why wait? Why go to all that trouble?'

'I didn't want to tell you until after the danger time had passed.'

Tom frowned. 'What danger time? What do you mean?'

'Most miscarriages happen in the first three months,' she explained, remembering something she once read in a magazine. 'I would have preferred to have waited and got that out of the way first before I got your hopes up. I didn't want to jinx it.'

Believing her, he pulled her to him in a soft hug. 'Oh God, I hope you haven't.' He slackened his hold. 'I'm not hurting you, am I?'

She laughed lightly. 'No, not at all.' She indicated the box. 'And you can throw that away now. The doctor has done another test and an examination and it's all official now.'

He tossed the box into the bin.

'Tom,' she said, wrapping her arms around his waist and snuggling up to him. 'When I tell Adam about the baby, I'd like to invite him to be involved.'

'What for? It has nothing to do with him.'

'Of course it does. He's a very dear friend and I think it would make him feel part of a family, less alone, useful possibly. He'd like that.'

'I'd rather not.'

'We have to tell him something. It's not like we can deny it's happening, he's going to notice sooner or later.' She made a rounded shape over her stomach with her hands. 'It would be mean to shut him out. He'd feel so rejected.'

'I...I don't know.'

'It would mean so much to him—' A thought. '— and it would be a help to *you*.'

'Me?'

'Yes. If I'm going to be here on my own all day while you're out at work, I'm going to need someone to keep an eye on me. To make sure I'm resting properly and not overdoing things. Adam could do that, and gladly, and it would put your mind at ease and stop you worrying. Wouldn't want you putting a nail through your hand because you've been worrying, would we?'

She could see him running the idea through his head.

'No,' he said slowly. He then puffed out his cheeks and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. Decision made.

'Okay, but on one condition. I don't want him butting in and trying to take charge. It's my - our - baby, not his. He'll be keeping an eye on you, nothing more, and when I say sod off—'

'He will,' she assured him. 'Thank you darling. He'll be as delighted as you are to hear the news, I'm sure. I'll bob by and tell him tomorrow.'

His grin re-established itself.

'What you grinning at?'

'I don't know...but I can't seem to be able to stop.'

Chapter 31

In a darkened room at the Health Centre, the ultrasound scan was quick and painless. After a quick squirt of cold jelly onto Linda's stomach, the operator, Mairie, passed a hand held device back and forth over her skin, stopping occasionally to consult the screen and touch her keypad.

'Well,' said Tom, bouncing in his seat with excitement. 'Can you tell what it is yet?'

'Who are you, Rolf Harris?' Linda chided him. 'Hush and let her do her job.'

'So far,' said Mairie, 'I can confirm you are pregnant and there is just the one foetus. It is alive, I can see its heart beating.'

'Can I see?'

Mairie turned the monitor to afford Linda and Tom a view, pointing out a barely visible pulsating speck with her fingertip. She then checked more details on the screen.

'I can also confirm that your dates are not far out, the measurements here put you at roughly...ten weeks.'

'Can you tell if it's a boy or a girl?' Tom chipped in.

'It's too early to tell I'm afraid.'

'Have a go,' he pestered.

Linda slapped his leg. 'Tom!'

'It's alright, Linda, I get this all the time.'

Mairie directed her attention at the overexcited father to be. 'I'm sorry, Mr Lewis, Tom, it's too soon. I can try again at your next scan.'

'When will that be? How long?'

'For goodness sake,' Linda hissed under her breath, embarrassed at his exuberance.

'At least another ten weeks,' Mairie said tolerantly. 'I'm afraid you're going to have to be a little patient.'

'Patience, I'm afraid, is not one of his strong suits,' explained Linda, and slapped his leg again.

She had never seen Tom so happy. The broad smile of a proud father-in-waiting hardly ever left his face. Even in his sleep, a trace remained. He doted on her even more than usual, and some days she almost had to force him from the house to go to his work.

He paid close attention to her every need and whim and watched over her like a hawk, insisting she rested and ate properly. When he made love to her, he reigned back his usual vigour and passion, being tender and careful. His zealous protectiveness, however, rapidly began to wear her down. To help the novelty wear off more quickly, she cautioned him that soon she would be the size of a whale, with swollen feet, stretch marks and haemorrhoids. It made not a jot of difference.

She sought refuge from Tom's devotion in Adam's arms. He too cared for her as if she were a tender flower, whilst at the same time respecting her privacy and her ability to take care of herself.

'I'm pregnant, not disabled,' she said. 'Until my stomach is so big I can't see my own feet, I can do anything I could do before. Now pass me that paint brush.'

He too made love to his lady, slowly and with tenderness and sensitivity.

'I brought you some groceries,' Linda said, placing two supermarket carrier bags on Adam's kitchen table.

'There's no need. I *can* buy my own.'

With the cynicism of experience, she opened a cupboard door to reveal the practically bare shelves within.

'I was going to go,' he said, closing the door.

'Of course you were. Help me unpack.'

She passed items to him to store in the cupboard; teabags, cereal, baked beans.

'Won't Tom notice you spending more on your grocery bill?' he said.

'He doesn't pay any attention to that. Domestic affairs are my domain.'

Cream crackers, two tins of soup and a packet of microwaveable pasta.

'Is he paying enough attention to you?'

Eggs, cheese, orange juice.

'Too much sometimes. I know he's excited, and I know he's worried about me, but...'

She sighed and passed him a jar of Bolognese sauce.

'...sometimes it feels like I've been wrapped in a duvet. I can't move, I can't breathe...and there's still months to go. God knows what he's going to be like later. But at least he's happy, that's all that matters.'

She handed him a loaf to put in the breadbox.

'What about you?' she said, screwing up the empty plastic bags and pushing them into the recycling box. 'You know you mean the world to me, Adam, and I worry about you. I don't want you to feel neglected.'

'I don't. Not in the least. We already resolved we're doing the right thing by keeping me at arm's length and I'm perfectly happy there.'

'Honestly?'

'Honestly. We done?'

'Not quite.'

From her shoulder bag she pulled out a large red pouch of Maltesers, his favourite sweeties, and waved it temptingly in front of him.

'Got you these.'

'Oh yes! Come to my my preciousssssss,' he beamed, taking and kissing the bag.

She went to the lavatory while he made coffee, and they both sat at the kitchen table to drink it.

'I want you to have this,' he said, handing her an envelope taken from a drawer in his newly acquired rustic pine dresser.

She eyed it suspiciously. 'What is it, a bill for my services? I don't come cheap you know.'

'Open it and see.'

She opened it and took out a slip of paper - a cheque. 'Three thousand pounds!' she exclaimed open mouthed. She held the cheque out to him. 'Take it back.'

'Nope. It's non refundable.'

He took a packet of biscuits from the cupboard and picked open the seal.

'I can't take this,' she said. 'You can't afford it.'

'You can and I can. I have had good news.'

He offered her the packet and she plucked a biscuit out. He took one for himself, dipped it into his coffee and took a bite.

'So!' she urged. 'Don't keep me in suspense. Tell me before I choke it out of you.'

He grinned. 'It seems, that there's been a bit of a cock up somewhere along the financial line,' he said, his mouth still half full.

'Clarify please.'

'Remember I told you that the money from the sale of the estate was already eaten up by taxes and debts and my grasping siblings.'

She nodded. 'Sort of.'

'The taxes couldn't be avoided, obviously, and the siblings have got their dues, but I've managed, with the help of a good accountant and some obscure legal loopholes, to get a fair chunk of the debt written off.'

'Oh, well done you!'

'Ah, but here's the real kicker,' he said, excitedly. 'It turns out I paid too much tax in the first place...quite a bit too much.'

'How much too much? A couple of hundred?'

A shake of the head.

'A thousand?'

Another shake.

'I give in. How much?'

Soundlessly, he spread his hands wide, like a fisherman telling a tall tale of a lost monster.

'I did a bit of calculating of my own, had a word with my bank manager, my solicitor and the taxman, and they confirmed it. Turns out I'm not quite as poor as I thought I was. In fact—'

He pulled a sheaf of papers from another drawer and passed them across the table to her. 'See for yourself.'

She scrutinized sheet after sheet, column after column, of figures, not sure what she was supposed to be looking at.

'I'm not good with numbers. What's the bottom line?' she said, confused.

He tapped a number at the base of the last page with his index finger. 'That,' he said.

'Are you sure?' she whispered, her eyes saucer wide with astonishment.

'Apparently so.'

'I thought it was someone's telephone number.'

'Nope.'

She was aghast. 'Jesus, Adam, how could you...they, make such a mistake? All that time you thought you were on your uppers and forced to live in that awful cellar, scrimping by, starving. You risked your health, your very life...and all for the sake of a misplaced decimal point. I can't believe it.'

'Believe it. Things are looking up. At long last.'

She looked at the figures again, and then at Adam gazing expectantly across the table to her.

'So now you've seen it for yourself, that I can afford it—' He pushed the envelope across the table to her.

'—you can accept the cheque with a clear conscience.'

She shoved it back to him. 'No, I still don't want to.'

'It's the least I can do,' he said sliding it back. 'You took me into your home and took care of my every need, like a proper Florence Nightingale. You did my laundry and gave me three square meals a day, gave me comfort and confidence and love, all of which are beyond price, and now you have extra things to buy for the baby. If it will make you feel better, call it an early Christmas present.'

'What if I tear it up?'

'Then I'll simply write another one...and I'll give it to Tom instead. He'll know what to do with it.'

He reached out to take the cheque back; she slapped her hand down onto it.

'You will not!'

She put the cheque into its envelope and tucked it into her bag. 'Thank you, darling.'

'It's my pleasure. I'm sorry it can't be more just now. I promise, next time it will be at least double.'

'Next time—? What—? No!'

'And I'll pay you for the groceries too. Don't let your coffee go cold.'

End of discussion.

Linda helped herself to another biscuit from the packet. 'So, Mister Moneybags, now that you're swimming in cash again, can I assume you won't be looking for a job any time soon?' she said.

Adam leaned back on his chair, arms folded across his chest, his expression pulled into a serious frown.

'I thought I still would,' he said. 'It will give me something to do to while away the time because...' He sighed ruefully, stroked his chin and affected a Scottish Noel Coward. 'To be brutally honest, my dear, being an idle rich bastard can be so crushingly dull, dont'cha know?'

Linda almost spat out her coffee as she burst into laughter.

Chapter 32

A car sounded its horn outside, and Tom dashed to the living room window, parted the blinds and waved to the occupants of the black Jeep parked at the kerbside outside the front garden gate.

'Right, I'm off.' He snatched up his holdall. 'I'll be back tomorrow evening.' He gave Linda a kiss. 'Behave yourself and get plenty of rest.'

'I will.'

'If you need anything...call Adam.' He kissed her again.

'I will.'

'Take care of your Mum, Archie.'

With the pleasure of being addressed, the little dog wagged his tail vigorously.

Linda walked with Tom to the front door. 'Bye, sweetheart, have a good time.'

Pecking a final kiss to her cheek, he dashed up the path and climbed into the front passenger seat of the waiting vehicle. She saw him fasten his seatbelt and turn to talk to someone in the back. After a moment, the car began to move off and with a broad grin on his face, he waved her goodbye. She waved until the car was out of sight.

She cleared away the remains of their lunch from the table and made herself a fresh cup of tea, which she took through to the living room, where she settled in the armchair, picked up the telephone and dialled.

It was answered after three rings. 'Hello?'

'Good afternoon, my love,' she said.

'Linda!' Adam exclaimed. 'What's wrong? What's happened? Are you alright?'

'Nothing's happened, I'm fine. What makes you think something's wrong?'

'It's Saturday.'

'I know what day it is.'

'We agreed, remember? No contact at weekends unless it was nothing short of disaster or death.'

'I'm sorry to frighten you, sweetie, but this weekend the rules don't apply.'

'How so?'

'Don't you remember me telling you about one of Tom's mates having a stag party in the City?'

'Aye, I remember you mentioning it. Is it today?'

'It is and he's just left. He'll be on the booze all night and crashing on his mate's sofa to sleep it off. I'm going to be all on my own tonight, all alone with no-one to talk to, and a big, empty bed. I'd really love for you to come and keep me company?'

'In your house, just the two of us...alone?'

'A-ha.'

Pause. 'What if he decides he doesn't want to stay away all night?'

'I'll tell him I was scared being alone and asked you to come and stay with me. It won't be an out and out lie. He knows I don't like being on my own, and he'll be pleased you cared enough to stay, now that we're just innocent, platonic friends and all.'

He snorted. 'I think being pregnant has addled your brain.' Pause. 'What time do you want me?'

'How about we make an evening of it with wine and dinner...about seven o'clock?'

'I'll be there.'

'Oh, and one more thing...on the way here, can you pick up something for me from the store?'

'Depends on what you want?'

'Sardines,' she said. 'I seem to have developed a real taste for them.'

At seven o'clock by the mantle clock, Linda, comfortably reading on the sofa with her dog on her lap, heard a light tapping at the back door, followed by a quiet squeak as it opened. Archie leapt down and trotted into the kitchen to investigate like any good guard dog would, although his interest lay more in protecting his food dish from thieves than his mistress from intruders, especially friendly intruders who brought treats.

Linda greeted Adam with a kiss. 'What are you doing sneaking around the back?'

'I didn't want to attract any attention.'

'Good grief, man, you've been practically living here for weeks. No-one's going to give you a second glance.' She cast an approving eye over him. 'You look very nice. Did you dress up for the occasion?'

He had on his smart slacks and casual jacket over one of the shirts she had given him as a present, although he was still wearing his old, tattered cap, which he took off and attempted to smooth down his unruly hair.

'I like to make a good impression whenever I can,' he said.

She put her arms around his neck and hugged him, and laid her palm to his face. He had shaved, or at least attempted to. A sniff at his throat filled her nostrils with the scent of his aftershave.

'Hmm, you smell good.' She nuzzled his neck.

'I might.' He thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and extracted three tins of sardines in tomato sauce. 'But these don't.'

She grabbed them with relish. 'Ooh, you got some. Lovely. I'll have them later. Thank you.'

She put the cans in the kitchen cupboard and led the way into the sitting room. Adam followed close behind.

'I don't think I should stay the night, Linda,' he said. 'It's too much of a risk.'

She removed his jacket from him and folded it neatly over the back of the sofa.

'I didn't think you would,' she said, her disappointment apparent. 'And it's okay. I'm not going to pressure you. I don't want you to be uncomfortable.'

'If Tom finds out...I'm a dead man—'

She put her fingers to his lips. 'Shush. It's okay. Stop fretting. I was being selfish. Indulge me; pregnant women get that way. Let's just enjoy being together while we can. Now kiss me.'

He pulled her face to his and kissed her, long and hard on her mouth and down her throat and then, falling

to his knees he lifted her loose shirt and kissed the skin of her pregnant stomach.

She ran her fingers through his messy hair as he rested his cheek against her abdomen. She got down on her knees with him and cradled his face, looking intently at him.

'Do you know what I would like to do to you, more than anything?'

A worried frown creased his brow. 'Nothing kinky, I hope,' he said. 'Not in your condition.'

She laughed. 'No, nothing kinky.' She put both her hands into his hair, and dragged her fingers through it, measuring out its length. 'What I'd really like to do is...cut your hair.'

'Away wi ye!'

'Why not? It's far too long for a respectable country gentleman, and it's getting a bit untidy. You look like an old hippy. I could make it look nice. I trained to be a hairdresser, years ago when I was young free and single, so I'll make a good job of it, I promise.'

He ran his hands through his tousled mop. 'I suppose it is getting a bit long.'

'Come on,' she said getting to her feet. 'Take a seat in the kitchen and I'll get my good scissors.'

He sat nervously on a kitchen chair, towels draped around his shoulders, as Linda used a plant spray bottle to wet his hair. She combed it through, dampening it evenly.

'Okey doke,' she said, clacking the scissors loudly. 'It's been a while, but I'm sure I can remember what to do. Ready?'

'No—'

'Keep still.'

Although she combed, snipped and trimmed with confident rapidity, he watched with more than a touch of consternation as clump after clump of his hair fell to the floor.

'You're not going to reveal a bald patch I didn't know was there, are you?' he said.

'No, sweetie, you have a fine head of hair. Nice and thick and wavy. It's lovely.'

She combed and snipped some more, shaping around his ears and the back of his neck.

'So, are you going anywhere nice for your holidays this year?' she asked, mimicking a clichéd, high-pitched hairdresser tone.

Adam, playing the game, adopted an aristocratic nasal drone. 'Ah thought ah might have a couple of weeks on mah private yacht in the Caribbean, yah! It'll be raaaather splendid to be waited on by a bevy of naked sun-kissed maidens, and suck rum out of their belly buttons, don'chew know?'

'Ooh, lavlee,' she squealed, and giggled inanely.

She moved around until she stood directly in front of him, her breasts just inches from his face, her erect nipples hard against the fabric of her shirt. He stared straight ahead, trying not to look at them, concentrating on keeping still and not giving her a chance to snip off the tip of an ear.

She towelled away the last of the dampness, ran her comb and fingers through his hair one last time, and finally announced herself to be finished.

'I'll get a mirror,' she said, leaving him alone with Archie. The dog looked up at him and cocked its head to one side.

'It's not that bad is it?'

Archie, of course, said nothing.

'Here we are,' she said, handing him a small hand mirror. With a degree of trepidation he looked at his reflection...and smiled. She had indeed done a good job. Until she tidied him up, he'd not appreciated how ragged his appearance had become. He now looked quite well groomed, despite the greying of his temples being now more noticeable.

'Okay?' she said.

He turned his head to the left and then to the right, examining all aspects. 'Nice job,' he said. 'You should do this professionally.'

'Nah,' she said, collecting up her scissors and comb. 'Being on my feet all day? It's too much like hard work now.'

'Did Tom make you give it up when you got married?'

'Hmmm,' she replied, ambiguously, and planted a brief kiss on his newly clipped head

Even with the grey, the haircut had indeed made him look more youthful, and his eyes more noticeable.

'It's taken years off you,' Linda said. 'You look gorgeous.'

She brushed loose hair from his neck and cleaned up the discarded locks and satisfied with her endeavour, rewarded his endurance with a glass of red wine and a late dinner of chilli con carne.

Sated by their meal, they relaxed on the sofa, enjoying a little more of the wine. She rested against a pile of cushions with Adam's head in her lap and soft jazz music playing in the background. Idly, she stroked through what was left of his hair.

'Has anyone ever told you, you are a beautiful man, Adam?' she said.

He smacked his lips. 'Erm...no, not recently...to be honest, not ever.'

'Then it's time someone did.' She caressed her hand down his cheek and over his chin. 'Adam Strachan you are a beautiful man...inside and out.'

'Ach, don't, you'll make me blush.'

'I like to see a man blush. It's quite...becoming.'

'And I think you're a wee bit tipsy.'

'No I'm not, I'm just...happy.' She pushed him off her and stood, stretching out her hands for him to take. 'Come on,' she said.

'Where are we going?'

'Where do you think? Or has having your hair cut chilled your brain?'

She led him upstairs. When they reached the landing, he turned to the right, towards the room he used to occupy. She pulled him back to the left, towards the master bedroom. Unhurriedly and with utmost care and tenderness, they made love in her marital bed.

At almost midnight, as they lay together in comfortable post coital warmth, the telephone extension rang. Linda let it ring three times before picking it up.

'Hello?'

Her ears were assaulted by a cacophony of sound which could, at a pinch, be mistaken for music, and somewhere in it, she could just make out a voice.

'Linda...is that you Lind?'

'Hello, Tom.'

'Hi babe, are you alright?'

'I'm just fine, darling.'

'I...I just want to tell you that I love you, Linda. You are my only love, Linda, you do know that don't you. You're the love of my life.' His words were slurred and almost unintelligible.

'Yes, Tom, I know.'

He belched drunkenly. 'You're my wife, Lindy...and you're going...going to have my baby. You know I'm the happiest man on the planet, don't you, babe. I love you.'

She covered the mouthpiece with her hand. 'It's Tom,' she whispered. 'He's paralytic. This is the 'I love you' call.'

'And I love you too, Tom,' she said. 'Are you having a good time?'

'Smashing. He hiccupped. 'Brilliant. 'Issa club, with dancers with tits and all sorts of other cool stuff.'

'Then go and enjoy yourself and I'll see you tomorrow when you get home.'

'Yep, I'll be home tomorrow.' Muffled voices momentarily interrupted the conversation. 'Jimmy says hello...and so does Ben...say hello Linda.'

'Hello boys,' she called into the receiver.

'Right I'm going now. Ta ta then, Lindy, I love you. Go to bed and get plenty of rest...because you're having my baby.'

'I know that, Tom. Goodnight, Tom.'

'Night night, love.' The call disconnected and she heard only the dialling tone. She replaced the handset.

'Is he having a good time?' said Adam from the pillow beside her.

'He thinks so, but he's so rat-arsed he doesn't know where he is or what he's there for. He does this every time he gets drunk. How he remembers the phone number is some kind of miracle in itself. I bet he won't be so happy tomorrow when the hangover kicks in.'

She rolled over to lie on top of Adam. 'Now, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?'

Chapter 33

For a moment, in her half-asleep state, Linda imagined she saw Adam's sleeping form beside her. When her eyes focused and she reached full wakefulness, she found it had been only wishful thinking and a rolled up duvet, and the bed beside her was unoccupied.

She ran her hand over the sheet. It was, as she expected, cold. She slid herself over onto the pillows where Adam's head had rested and breathed in to smell the remnant of his aftershave on the cotton cover. She cuddled the pillow close against her and fell back into a doze.

She awoke again at half past nine and could think only of Adam, bringing to mind his warmth, his smell, his touch. Her hand drifted to her nethers, and urged on by the tangible memories, slowly began to massage herself.

She clutched the scented pillow to her, the rhythmic pressure on her clitoris and the pitching of her hips building her excitement and bringing her to climax. A wave of delight coursed through her, ripping his name from her throat and thrusting it into the empty room.

She held onto the pillow until the sensations left her. She rose, showered and dressed, and stripped the sheets and pillowcases from the bed. If she could smell the aftershave on them, there was a very good chance Tom would too. She put the bedding in the washing machine on a long wash to ensure they would be completely clean.

After making herself a light breakfast and feeding Archie, she tidied away the wine bottle and washed up the glasses and the dishes from the previous night's dinner. Happy with the tidiness of the house, she picked up the telephone and dialled. It rang just once before it was answered.

Linda begged him to stay the night. He declined, citing again his fear of a battering, but agreed to stay until she fell asleep. She vowed to stay awake all night if necessary, and tried to. However it didn't take long before, lulled by wine, sex, and his steady heartbeat, she relaxed against him and her breathing became slow and deep as she slid into sleep. A little after two o'clock, he disengaged himself from her hold and slipped from her bed.

He gathered up his clothes, crept silently down the stairs and dressed in the living room. A curious Archie came to investigate the late night disturbance, but finding nothing of interest, went back to bed.

Adam used his own key to lock Linda safely inside the house, and rolled the Land Rover down the lane, switching on neither engine nor lights, lest they be seen by a neighbour and arouse suspicion and the news get back to Tom.

At the bottom of the lane, he bump started the vehicle and drove to his cottage. Less than twenty minutes later, he was in his own bed, and asleep within moments.

Weak November sunshine streamed through his unshaded bedroom window and woke him. He checked his bedside clock; ten thirty gone.

Normally an early riser, it was unusual for him to sleep so late. However, as it was Sunday, he had nothing particular to do, and if it had not been for the fact that Finn would be waiting by the back door to be let out to relieve himself, he might have stayed abed until lunchtime.

He let the dog out and put food in its bowl, before returning upstairs to the bathroom. In the shower, he allowed water and lather to flow over his skin, the bubbles reminiscent of Linda's silky soft hands caressing over him and as he formed his image of her in his mind, his hand wandered to his cock.

Massaging himself with slick, soapy hands, he soon brought himself to full erection and a warm, tense

sensation grew in his groin. The tension built to a near euphoria and with a few more strokes and a barely restrained cry, he climaxed forcefully into his hands. The sense of release was wonderful and he thanked Mother Nature for the gift.

Unashamedly naked, he stood before his new bathroom mirror, applying a razor to his foamy cheeks and chin. He dried his hair and assessed his newly shorn, fresh faced appearance in the mirror, and found he liked it. Clean and freshened up and feeling chipper, he made himself coffee and toast for a late breakfast.

As he ate his meagre meal, an idea occurred to him. He would invite Linda to see him later that day, and he would do something special to make up for his abandonment of her; something she would never expect. He would ring her now, and tell her.

Practically the instant he put his hand to the phone, it rang. He answered it with a cautious, 'Hello?'

Linda's clear and bright, 'Hey sweetie,' came through to him, and he immediately relaxed again.

'Good morning to you,' he said, pleased to hear her voice. 'Are you okay?'

'I woke this morning to find a sad cold indentation in the pillow where you should have been, and the sheets all empty. I didn't like it much.'

'I'm sorry about that.'

'I had to call you. I missed you. Just the sound of your voice warms me through.'

'Me too, but I couldn't stay. You do understand?'

'Yes, I do.'

There was a long pause before they spoke simultaneously.

'...Can I see you?'

'...I want to see you?'

'You first,' said Adam.

'Can I see you today? We still have time. Tom won't be back until this evening.'

'I was going to ask you the same thing. Can you come here, to the cottage?'

'I think so, yes.'

'Then I'll meet you here. Be here at one o'clock. Don't be late.'

'What's going on?' she said with suspicion.

'You'll see. One o'clock.'

'I'll be there.'

At ten minutes past one, Linda, wrapped up against the cold in a padded jacket, thick woollen bobble hat and gloves, drew up outside Adam's cottage. She pulled off a glove and rapped on the door. He opened it and tapped his watch. 'You're late.'

'I'm sorry,' she puffed. 'The screen was still iced and the heater's packed up. What's going on? Can I come in?'

'In a minute. Turn around.'

'Why?'

'Humour me.'

She did as he asked and put his hands over her eyes.

'What are you doing? What are you up to?'

'Shh! Patience.'

He turned her around, and blinded, yet trusting, she allowed him to guide her. After a few steps, he removed his hands. She blinked, she saw, and a large smile crossed her face.

The furniture had all been pushed back against the walls, leaving a clear space in the middle of the floor in which a tartan blanket had been spread out, and on it, a rudimentary picnic - a mismatched assortment of crockery with rough-cut ham and pickle sandwiches, red apples cut into slices, mini pork pies, small shop-bought cupcakes, an assortment of cheeses and crackers, and a dish of ready salted crisps. A bottle of sparkling wine and two glasses took centre stage.

Linda clapped her hands with delight. 'Oh, how wonderful!'

Archie ran over to the picnic and began sniffing around feverishly, his tail a wagging blur. She called him away.

'It's not for you, Arch. Leave it alone.'

She shooed the dog into the kitchen, where he joined Finn in his basket. She closed the door on the dogs.

'I was going to take it up into the wood and spread it under the Heart,' he said. 'But it's too cold and damp. So I thought, why not do it here, in front of the fire?'

She kissed his cheek. 'Why not indeed, you sweet and clever thing?'

He helped her off with her coat and hat, and sat her on a cushion. When she was comfortable, he handed her a plate. 'What would be your pleasure, my dear?'

She helped herself to a little of everything, a piece of kitchen towel acting as a napkin.

'I hope it's properly chilled,' he said, twisting the cap on the bottle of cheap sparkling wine.

'I'm sure it will be fine.'

He poured out the bubbly liquid, and handed her a fizzing glass. 'There you go.'

He held his up in a toast. 'To the lovely Linda, and her equally lovely baby. Happiness, health and wealth to you both.'

'What about you? You should include yourself.'

'Next glass,' he said. They touched glasses with a light clink and sipped the liquid. It was chilled enough, but they both screwed up their faces at the harshness of the taste. Only good manners prevented Adam from spitting it out.

'Urgh! Bad choice. I'm sorry. I'll do better next time.'

They ate until they were both full. Adam tidied the picnic detritus together and put it aside; Linda brushed crumbs from the front of her shirt. He straightened out the tartan rug and lay down on his back, his arm curled under a cushion at his head.

'Just as if the sun was shining,' he said, closing his eyes.

She lay over him and rested her head on his stomach, hearing it gurgling as it tackled the unsophisticated food. He stroked her hair as they lay in relaxed conviviality, the quietness punctuated by the soft crackling of the logs in the stove, and the dogs sniffing out stray crumbs and morsels.

'That was a lovely meal,' she said.

Adam chuckled. 'Not exactly *Cordon Bleu* was it?'

'It was enchanting.'

'It was a spur of the moment thing, hence its rough and readiness.'

'A spontaneous picnic on your living room floor. What could be more perfect?'

She sighed her contentment.

'Were you very disappointed about my sneaking out in the middle of the night?' said Adam.

'A bit. It would have been nice to wake up next to you; to watch you sleep.'

'You've seen me sleep plenty of times.'

'Only when you were ill. I meant sleeping peacefully, properly.'

'I wouldn't have slept a wink anyway. I was too scared of Tom coming home unexpectedly and catching us.'

'He wouldn't have, but I understand.' She turned herself over and shifted until she could cuddle up to him. 'You're always so thoughtful, Adam. That's what I love about you.'

He wrapped his arms around her. 'I'm not really. There was another good reason I didn't stay.'

'Oh?'

'Aye, but this was more to do with me maintaining my dignity.'

'What do you mean?'

'You would have discovered the horrible truth - I snore like a train.'

She chortled quietly. 'Steam or diesel?'

'Both...at the same time.'

They lay in silence again, bathed in the warmth of the fireside. Linda drifted off into a light doze, only to awake with a start to find Adam had himself fallen asleep. She looked into his calm features as he rested; watched him closely, and listened. He did not snore. Her wish to be able to watch him sleep had been fulfilled, yet she felt an irresistible urge to kiss him awake.

'Oh, Lord,' he said, stretching himself. 'Falling asleep in front of a guest is a dreadful thing to do. So incredibly rude.'

'You looked lovely and restful,' she said, her hands busy, undoing his belt. They were soon engaged in unbuttoning and unzipping his pants.

'What are you doing?' he asked with bland innocence.

She grinned mischievously. 'Making up for what we missed this morning.'

Chapter 34

Adam locked the cottage door behind them.

'I don't want to go home,' Linda said, pulling on her gloves. 'It's been so lovely here this afternoon. I just want it to go on.'

'We'll do it again.'

'Yes please, that would be nice. When?'

'Soon.'

Taking care on the slippery path, he led her to her car, opened the door and helped her into the seat. Archie leapt onto her knee, and she pushed him across onto the passenger seat.

'I'll follow you home, see you safely in, and then I need to pick up some milk from the market,' Adam said.

He climbed into the driver's seat of the Land Rover and turned the key. The battery was running low again and it took several turns for the engine to catch and roar into noisy life.

'That's it old girl,' he coaxed. 'Don't give up on me yet. You're all I've got.'

He pulled up behind Linda's Volvo at her back gate. She leaned into the Land Rover, the body of the ancient vehicle juddering under her.

'I had a wonderful time, Adam. I enjoyed every minute of it.'

'It was my pleasure.'

'It was a really sweet thought. Thank you.' She cupped his face and kissed his mouth. 'You're a wonderful man, Adam. How can I not love you?'

He stroked her cheek. 'When will I see you again?'

'Tomorrow?'

'What about Tom?'

'He'll have a raging hangover and be in full 'pity me' mode,' but he still has to go to work. Can I come round for coffee?'

'About eleven?'

'Perfect.'

After a brief farewell peck on the lips, he wound up the window and watched as she picked her way down the garden path, and safely into the house.

Home by herself once more, she tidied around the living room, plumped the cushions on the sofa and put the newly washed bed linen into the tumble dryer, before trekking upstairs to make up the bed.

With her tasks done and everything in order, she put on the TV and sat on the sofa, thumbing through the listings magazine to wait for Tom to come home.

The bright twin beams of headlamps swept across the front window. The taxi's rear door opened and, propelled by an unseen hand, Tom lurched out of it.

Through parted blinds, Linda watched his progress as he fumbled with the latch on the gate, and weaved his way down the garden path. He leaned on the doorbell, ringing it continuously until she opened the door and let him in.

He looked dreadful, unshaven, with dark circles under his eyes and sporting a large purple bruise on his forehead. His pained expression hinted at the presence of a more than substantial headache.

She addressed the dishevelled being before her. 'Did you have a nice time, sweetie?'

'Smashing thanks,' he whispered hoarsely, as he reached out for the back of the sofa, skirted around it, to fall face down onto the seat, groaning loudly.

'Can I get you anything? Coffee, aspirins...coffin?'

'All three,' he said into the cushions.

She brewed coffee, and rooted out aspirins from the medical box. When she returned to the sitting room, he had not moved.

'Come on,' she said. 'Sit up and drink this.'

It took a gargantuan effort for him to force himself upright, and he took the coffee and aspirins from her with feeble thanks. He sipped the strong brew and swallowed the pills.

'Never again,' he said. 'Never again.'

She giggled. 'If I had a pound for every time I've heard that from you over the years, I'd be a bloody millionaire.'

'I feel like something small and hairy has used my mouth as a toilet, and then died in there,' he said. 'Have my eyes exploded?'

'No.' She touched the bruise on his forehead and he winced. 'How did you get that?'

'Ben said I fell off a barstool, but I dunno. I never felt a thing. I didn't know anything about it until I saw it this morning. It would seem Vodka shots, if taken in sufficient and liberal quantity, are the ideal anaesthetic.'

He swallowed his coffee with satisfied gulps, belched and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'Were you okay here by yourself? I know you don't like being alone.'

'I wasn't by myself. Adam stopped by.'

'Oh?'

'I asked him to. I wanted some company and I needed more sardines. I cut his hair and he stayed for a drink...'

'You and your fish.' A swallow from the cup. 'Whoa, back up. You gave him a haircut?'

'He needed one; he was starting to look like a real Raggedy Annie. Afterwards we had supper and watched TV, and when he was sure I was okay, he went home.' Not the entire truth, but close enough to be convincing. 'And I had Archie to stand guard. It was nice of you to phone me in the middle of the night, though.'

He drained his coffee mug. 'Eh? I don't think I did.'

'Yes you did; you always do.'

'Huh.'

'Luckily I was reading, so you didn't wake me.' She found lying coming easily to her again.

'What did I say?'

'Just the usual - 'I love you, Lind', 'You're my best friend, Lind'; Hic, belch, fart.'

'I don't remember.' He handed her the empty mug and slumped sideways into the cushions.

'Uurrrgggghhh. I don't feel well, Lind. My head hurts.'

'It's your own fault. I have no sympathy for you. And you'll have to feel better by tomorrow because you have to go to work.'

His fragile state would only allow him a low, pitiful whimper.

The next morning, he still looked hung over, but managed to force down his breakfast and a couple more aspirins, tucking the box into the breast pocket of his shirt in case he should need them later.

Initially, he had trouble on his bicycle, wobbling precariously until he found his balance, and Linda, with some apprehension, watched from the garden gate as his lights disappeared down the darkened lane towards the Castle.

Chapter 35

At ten past eleven the next morning, Linda and Adam were sharing morning coffee at his kitchen table.

'You should have seen him, he could hardly walk down the path. He was staggering all over the place, and then he stumbled in and collapsed on the sofa, moaning and grumbling - Urggh! I don't feel well, Lind.' It was pathetic...but really funny.'

Her eyes sparkled and she chuckled quietly into her mug as she relayed Tom's tale of woe.

'You're so very much in love with him, aren't you?' Adam said.

She dipped a biscuit in her coffee, and took a bite. 'Of course I am. He's Tom. What's not to love?'

Adam's eyes dropped to the tabletop. 'Do you think you could ever love me in that way, not just as a friend?'

'Oh, sweetie.' She put down her mug and rounded the table to put her arms around his neck and lower herself onto his knees, laying his head against her shoulder. 'You *know* how much I love you, my darling.'

'But never as much as you love Tom?' He ran his lips over the skin of her neck and inhaled her perfume – a subtle floral scent with undertones of vanilla.

'Of course as much, and you are much more than a friend. You are the father of my baby. That makes you a part of me.' She kissed his hair and touched her cheek against his head. 'I'll let you into a secret shall I? My dearest wish is that I could be married to both of you, and we could all live together in the same house. Don't you think that would be so perfect?'

'You wouldn't want to do that. We'd be at each other's throats in five minutes.'

'Yes, I would, and given the chance, I'd do it in a heartbeat. It would be perfect. One big happy family.'

'Hmm.' He brushed his cheek against the soft fabric of her sweater. 'So in this Utopian household of yours, where would I sleep?'

'With me - on the right.'

'And where would Tom sleep?'

'With me - on the left.'

He kissed down her neck to where it met her shoulder. 'Three in a bed?' he mused. 'Don't you think it might be a bit...cramped.'

'Not with the right size bed.' She lifted his head and looked him straight in the eyes.

'Have you ever imagined all of us in the same bed together?' she said, her whisper low and seductive.

'A threesome?'

'A-ha.'

His eyes widened. 'I hope you...you're not seriously suggesting...?'

She ran her finger over his lips. 'Oh come on, darling, can you honestly say you haven't given it the tiniest little thought? I know I have...often. In fact...' She sighed in his ear and nibbled at his lobe. '...I'm thinking about it right now.'

Redness crept up his neck into his cheeks. 'Ha...have you, I mean are you? Oh, God, please don't.'

'Why not? I think it would be a new and exciting experience for all of us, don't you?'

'I don't...I don't know.'

Her fingers ran through his hair. 'Don't you think it would be quite an adventure...all three of us tucked up in one big bed, all...intertwined?'

He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly very dry. 'Is...is...is that what you would really want?'

'Oh, yes,' she breathed, and unzipped the front of her top. 'The very thought of it...it's making me, a little bit hot...' She blew out a little puff of air and caressed her hand over her décolletage.

She opened the first button on his shirt. 'How about you? Are you getting hot at the thought of it?' The second button came undone, and she put her hand inside.

He gulped again. 'Erm...not really.'

'Oooh, that's a shame.' She kissed his exposed throat. 'Let's see if I can't persuade you.'

The deeply alluring look in her eyes made him clear his throat nervously. 'I can't deny it's never...ahem...crossed my mind, but that's as far as it's ever gone – thinking about it. It's not something I would...ahem...ever consider actually doing.'

She moistened her slightly parted lips with a stroke of her tongue. 'Why not?'

'B-b- because when we-we-we make love, together, it's between us. It's our intimacy, private. Having someone else there, watching, touching...ahem...joining in...well...it would make it into some kind of...sideshow, and I...ahem...I don't fancy turning our most cherished times into some kind of public performance.'

Suddenly the seductive temptress disappeared and the real Linda returned. 'That's exactly what I thought you'd say,' she said, a smile of pure wickedness dividing her face.

Open mouthed, he frowned at her. 'You mean you were just ribbing me all along?'

'Of course I was, and you fell for it hook, line and sinker.'

He blew out a deep breath. 'Well thank God for that. I was getting a wee bit worried there for a minute.'

She giggled, kissed him, and held his cheeks in her hands. 'You should have seen the look on your face. It was a picture! Absolutely priceless!'

His index finger pointed sharply at her. 'You, Linda Lewis, are a sinful woman, and I think it is beholding to me to have to punish you for your naughtiness.'

In one swift movement he stood, pushed her off his lap and swept her off her feet and into his arms. She had not gained any weight during the three months of her pregnancy, and he had no trouble carrying her slight frame up the stairs and depositing her onto his bed.

'Prepare to accept a severe chastisement, you shameless hussy,' he warned with faked severity. She lay back with her arms above her head and grabbed a

hold of the upright bars of the brass bedstead in imitation of being tied there.

'Be gentle, your honour. It's my first offence.

'Aye, and I'm the Easter Bunny,' he said, as he stripped her jeans from her.

Chapter 35

At ten past eleven the next morning, Linda and Adam were sharing morning coffee at his kitchen table.

'You should have seen him, he could hardly walk down the path. He was staggering all over the place, and then he stumbled in and collapsed on the sofa, moaning and grumbling - Urggh! I don't feel well, Lind.' It was pathetic...but really funny.' Her eyes sparkled and she chuckled quietly as she relayed Tom's tale of woe.

'You're so very much in love with him, aren't you?' Adam said.

She dipped a biscuit in her coffee, and took a bite. 'Of course I am. He's Tom. What's not to love?'

Adam's eyes dropped to the tabletop. 'Do you think you could ever love me in that way?'

'Oh, sweetie.' She put down her mug and rounded the table to put her arms around his neck and lower herself onto his knees, laying his head against her shoulder. 'You know how much I love you, my darling.'

'But never as much as you love Tom?' He ran his lips over the skin of her neck and inhaled her perfume – a subtle floral scent with undertones of vanilla.

'Of course as much.' She kissed his hair and touched her cheek against his head. 'I'll let you into a secret shall I? My dearest wish is that I could be married to both of you, and we could all live together in the same house. Don't you think that would be so perfect?'

'You wouldn't want to do that.'

'Yes, I would, and given the chance, I'd do it in a heartbeat.'

'Hmm.' He brushed his cheek against the soft fabric of her sweater. 'So in this Utopian household of yours, where would I sleep?'

'With me - on the right.'

'And where would Tom sleep?'

'With me - on the left.'

He kissed down her neck to where it met her shoulder. 'Three in a bed?' he mused. 'That would be...cramped.'

'Then I'll get a bigger bed, silly.' She lifted his head and looked him straight in the eyes.

'Have you ever thought about it?' she said, her whisper low and seductive. 'Have you ever imagined all of us in the same bed together - a threesome?'

His eyes widened. 'I hope you...you're not seriously suggesting...?'

She ran her finger over his lips. 'Oh come on, darling, can you honestly say you haven't given it the tiniest little thought? I know I have...often. In fact...' She sighed in his ear and nibbled at his lobe. '...I'm thinking about it right now.'

Redness began to creep up his neck into his cheeks, and he became breathless with embarrassment.

'Ha...have you, I mean are you? Oh, God, please don't.'

'Why not? I think it would be a new and exciting experience for all of us, don't you?'

'I don't...I don't know.'

Her fingers ran through his hair. 'Don't you think it would be quite an adventure...all three of us tucked up in one big bed?'

He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly very dry. 'Is...is...is that what you would really want?'

'Oh, yes,' she breathed, and unzipped the front of her top. 'The very thought of it...it's making me, a little bit hot...' She blew out a little puff of air and caressed her hand over her décolletage. She opened the first button on his shirt. 'How about you? Are you getting hot at the thought of it?' The second button came undone, and she put her hand inside.

He gulped again. 'Erm...not really.'

'Oooh, that's a shame.' She kissed his exposed throat. 'Let's see if I can't persuade you.'

The deeply alluring look in her eyes made him clear his throat nervously. 'I can't deny it's never...ahem...crossed my mind, but that's as far as it's

ever gone – thinking about it. It's not something I would...ahem...ever consider actually doing.'

She moistened her slightly parted lips with a stroke of her tongue. 'Why not?'

'B...b...because when we...we...we make love, together, it's between us. It's our intimacy, private. Having someone else there, watching, touching...ahem...joining in...well...it would make it into some kind of...sideshow, and I...ahem...I don't fancy turning our most cherished times into some kind of public performance.'

Suddenly the seductive temptress disappeared and the real Linda returned. 'That's exactly what I thought you'd say,' she said with a wicked smile.

Open mouthed, he frowned at her. 'You mean you were just ribbing me all along?'

'Of course I was, and you fell for it hook, line and sinker.'

He blew out a deep breath. 'Well thank God for that. I was getting a wee bit worried there for a minute.'

She giggled, kissed him, and held his cheeks in her hands. 'You should have seen the look on your face. It was a picture!'

His index finger pointed sharply at her. 'You, Linda Lewis, are a sinful woman, and I think it is beholding to me to have to punish you for your naughtiness.'

In one swift movement he stood, pushed her off his lap and swept her off her feet and into his arms. She had not gained any weight during the three months of her pregnancy, and he had no trouble carrying her slight frame up the stairs and depositing her onto his bed.

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'Be gentle, your honour. It's my first offence.'

'Aye, and I'm the Easter Bunny,' he said, as he stripped her jeans from her.

Chapter 36

Autumn progressed into winter. The wind changed direction and the temperature began to fall. High in the sky, geese honked as they flew in their V shaped formations, heading south for warmer climes. Trees were naked now, stripped of their leaves, and more mornings dawned to a coating of white frost. Occasionally there would be snow flurries, but most days it was just depressingly grey and overcast.

When the mist came down, it kissed the ground and blanked out everything in view. Some days it was so thick, Adam could not see the line of the track away from his cottage, and his beloved wood, not at all.

When the clocks changed, signifying Summer Time to be officially over, it came light late and went dark early. Daylight hours shortened and the days raced towards midwinter and the holiday season.

For Christmas and Hogmanay, Tom and Linda went away to visit their families, eager to relay the news of their prospective grandparenthood.

Adam, left behind to spend the holidays alone with his dog, opened the gifts she left him for him - a DVD recorder and a library of his favourite films, along with a bottle of Teaninich whisky.

He read the card attached to the neck of the bottle;

Merry Christmas, my darling Adam.
Get your tongue around this one if you can,
clever clogs!
ILY
Linda x x

He twisted the cap and inhaled the rich, peaty smell. 'That's *tee-an-inik*, my love,' he said, as he poured himself a glass. He raised a toast to her and their baby. 'Slàinte.'

The bottle and the films kept him good company in her absence.

They experienced the coldest January for over twenty years. Water froze in the unlagged pipes at Adam's cottage, expanding them until they split. The damage did not become apparent until a temporary thaw, and he woke one morning to find his kitchen swimming in icy water. Already a good two inches deep, it continued to pour through the ceiling from the bathroom above.

With the cottage once again rendered uninhabitable, he packed his bags and his dog, and moved back into Linda's spare bedroom. She professed sympathy with his plight, while at the same time secretly delighted at having him back in her home.

With work at the Castle suspended during the bad weather, Tom and a plumber workmate helped Adam repair the damage.

Linda was not allowed to join them, under orders to remain at home, safe and warm, while the men, snugly wrapped in thermal underwear, thick jackets and hats, undertook the work in the freezing property.

She welcomed them back in the evening with hugs, a warming meal and mugs of hot chocolate.

It took nearly three weeks for the cottage to dry out sufficiently for Adam to be able to move back in. Linda fussed that the damp might bring on a relapse of his bronchitis, perhaps another pneumonia, but her fears were unfounded. He remained fit and well, and returned to his now properly insulated and heated home.

In late February, Tom took time off work to attend Linda's second ultrasound examination. He clung onto her hand and paid close attention to every detail. When sonographer Mairie pointed to the foetus' penis and proudly declared, 'It's a boy, Mr Lewis,' he promptly burst into tears.

The two women looked at each other, and in unison shook their heads and mouthed, 'Men!'

'I have something to show you,' said Linda, as she pulled a grainy black and white photograph from her handbag. Adam put down his coffee cup and took the picture from her.

'What is it?' He turned it this way and that, squinting at it.

She leaned over his shoulder to point to the fuzzy area in the middle of the picture. 'It's your son, Adam. I've been for an ultrasound. They can look inside me at the baby and see how he's growing. They took a picture.' She traced an outline with her finger. 'That's his head...and that's his spine...and that there...it's a little leg. Look, you can even count his toes.'

He stared at the picture and suddenly, like a Magic Eye picture, it all became clear. He gasped and a fascinated, delighted grin illuminated his face.

'Jings! Will you look at that! It's amazing...' He pecked her on the cheek. 'You're amazing.'

'I haven't done anything. He's growing in here all by himself.'

'It's definitely a boy then?'

'Oh yes.' She stroked her gently swelling belly. Suddenly she flinched. 'Oooh!'

Concern immediately replaced Adam's grin. 'What is it? Is something wrong? Are you in pain?'

'No,' she said, smiling. 'It's alright, don't panic. I think...I think I just felt him move.'

Adam put his hand on her stomach. 'I can't feel anything.'

'No, it's too small to feel from the outside, but there was definitely something there. It was just a fluttering, like a butterfly inside.'

'Maybe it's indigestion.'

'Maybe, but I don't think so. I think he's just letting us know he knows we're talking about him.'

Her smile faded and she sat at the opposite side of the table, a look of preoccupation clouding her features.

'What's the matter?'

She stroked her stomach lightly. 'It's just struck me that there really is something in there growing inside

me, and I'm almost half way through. I know it seems a long way off, but in a few months, I'm going to have to give birth.'

Adam looked at the photograph again. 'I don't think you can get round that fact,' he said.

'I think I'm a little bit scared, Adam.'

'I don't blame you, it's a scary thing. But you'll be well looked after.'

'I know. But what is there's something wrong with the baby? What if there's something wrong with me—?'

'There won't be—'

'How do you know? What if something goes wrong with the birth? What if the baby dies? What if I die, who will look after it?'

'Now, shush,' he said, pulling her to her feet and holding her close. 'You're panicking o'er nothing. It won't come to that. You'll be fine. The baby will be fine. Everything will be fine.'

She pushed herself away from him to look intently into his eyes. 'You'll be there won't you?'

'Where?'

'With me, when I have the baby. You have to be there.'

'It's not for me to say.'

'You have to. I'm going to need someone steady and reliable, and I know I can trust and rely on you. Tom will be useless. He gets too excited and he'll go to pieces. I want you to be there. I need you Adam.' Her self confidence had been thrown into disarray, he could hear it in her voice.

'I don't think I'll be allowed,' he said, quietly to calm her. 'And I'm pretty certain Tom would never agree to it.'

'He will if I say so.'

'He might not,' he argued.

'Then I'll demand it. Tom is squeamish, he can't stand anything...bodily. It'll be too much for him. I know he'll faint, in fact I guarantee it. I need someone who will be strong for me and look out for him, and that person is you, Adam. You'll do it, won't you? Please?'

The pleading in her huge moist eyes made the decision for him. She was frightened, and as he had already promised to be a supportive friend and help in any way he could, he couldn't refuse her request. He pulled her back against him. 'Aye, if it will stop you fretting, and if Tom agrees, I'll do it.'

He gathered her into a tight, protective hug, and held her until her fear subsided.

Chapter 37

Linda had been lucky in being spared that awful torment of pregnancy – morning sickness, and at six months gone, it was too late to start now, surely.

Yet on waking early, she felt a definite queasiness in her stomach and wasn't so sure.

When a deep cramping pain radiated around her abdomen and into her legs, making her groan, she rubbed her stomach to ease the cramp away.

Definitely not morning sickness.

'Are you alright, Lind?' said Tom, noticing her discomfort.

The pain dispersed. 'Yes, I think so. I just feel a bit...icky.'

'You've been tossing and turning in your sleep for a while.'

'Have I?'

'You were mumbling something too.'

'What did I say?'

'Mumbled and moans; no proper words.'

Another cramp hit, and nausea rose in her. She threw back the cover and leapt from the bed, dashing across the landing to the bathroom, where she dropped to her knees and vomited yellow bile into the toilet. She sensed Tom come up behind her, and felt his hand on the back of her neck.

'You feel hot,' he said. 'What's the matter, babe?'

She spat into the bowl and wiped spittle from her chin with a piece of toilet paper.

'Must be something I ate?'

Tom flushed the toilet and helped her to her feet. 'Those flaming sardines I bet.'

She felt decidedly dizzy. 'Maybe.'

'Jesus, Lind, you're as white as a ghost. What's wrong?'

She leaned against him as the floor moved under her. 'I'm okay. I just feel a bit sick, and a bit—'

'Oh God, Lind, you're bleeding!' he exclaimed.

'What?'

'Down there!' He pointed to where her panties were just visible beneath her baggy t-shirt. 'You're bleeding. Oh Jesus, Lind, the baby!'

She didn't hear his final exclamation, the buzzing in her ears drowning it out, quickly followed by an all enveloping darkness. Her legs buckled, and she sank to the ground in a dead faint.

Tom reacted instinctively, grabbing her as she fell. He swept her up into his arms and carried her into the bedroom, laying her carefully on the bed. She regained consciousness to find him rubbing and kissing her hand.

'Lind! Oh my God, Lindy! Speak to me, babe. Please be all right, Lind!'

'I'm okay, sweetie,' she murmured. 'I just felt a bit woozy. I'm alright now.'

'You were spark out and it was like carrying a burning coal to get you here. It's not just about you, babe, think about the little 'un.' He picked up the extension telephone. 'I'm calling the doctor.' His finger hovered over the number pad. 'What's the number...oh, bugger, Lind, I don't know the number. Will he even come on a Saturday?'

'Don't panic, Tom. It's alright, calm down. The number is downstairs on the notice board.'

'Right...don't move.' He ran from the room and she heard him almost stumble in his haste to get down the stairs. She partly heard his half of the conversation on the downstairs phone, and then his rapid steps, including a trip on the stairs, as he rushed back to her side.

'He's coming,' he said, rubbing at his leg. 'About an hour, he said. 'I've left the front door open. Are you in any pain?'

'Not much; are you? Did you hurt yourself?'

He examined his leg. 'I banged it on the stairs when I slipped. It's nothing.'

'Let me see.'

'Forget me, what about you?'

'Oh no...!' She sat up and pushed him out of her way. 'I rather think I'm going to be sick again.'

'Wait...hang on.' He helped her to her feet and half carried her to the bathroom, where she squatted and clutched the toilet bowl tightly, another wave of nausea sweeping through her. She spat more vile tasting bile into the water.

'God, Lind, you do look a bit green around the gills.'

Another cramp hit, and she doubled over with a loud groan.

Tom, helpless in the face of his wife's distress, began to panic, his face etched with fear. 'What can I do, doll? What can I do? Tell me.'

She grasped his hand to calm him before he went completely to pieces. 'Nothing, sweetheart,' she said. 'Let's just try and be calm as we wait for the doctor, eh?'

'Are you losing the baby, Lind? Please don't be losing the baby. We've waited so long for him - you can't lose him now.'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I just don't know.'

The next hour dragged by in wave after wave of nausea, retching and cramping, until a voice called up from downstairs. 'Hello, it's Doctor Glass! Is anybody home?'

'Up here!' shouted Tom, scrambling to his feet. There were footsteps on the stairs, and a casually dressed, bespectacled man appeared framed in the doorway.

'Hello,' he said, smiling benignly. 'I understand you might be having a bit of trouble.'

The combination of managing Tom's anxiety, fainting and vomiting had exhausted Linda, and she could only nod weakly.

Doctor Glass sat on the bed beside her, took her medical notes from his bag, and perused them.

'You're about twenty five weeks pregnant, is that right?'

'Yes.'

'And you're having pain and bleeding?'

'Yes.'

'Right, let's have a wee look at the pair of you shall we?'

Tom observed intently as the doctor listened to Linda's heart and lungs, checked her pulse and took her temperature, felt her abdomen and made copious notes.

'I want to do an internal examination, is that okay?'

Linda agreed, but Tom looked horrified and backed away. 'I'll wait outside,' he said, edging from the room and closing the door behind him.

'He's a bit squeamish,' she explained.

Glass snapped on a pair of sterile latex gloves, and positioned Linda on the bed. He pressed on her abdomen with one hand and inserted the fingers of the other into her vagina. He moved his hand over her stomach, looking thoughtful. He withdrew his fingers, and removed the gloves, wrapping them in their packaging.

'I don't think you're having a miscarriage, Linda. The cervix is fully closed.'

'But the bleeding—'

'It's a tiny amount. When it soaks into fabric, it always looks more than it is.' He applied an antibacterial gel to his hands and rubbed it in.

'Can I ask you, Linda, did you have sexual intercourse last night?'

'No.' She lowered her voice to a whisper, not wanting Tom to overhear about her sleeping with Adam the previous day. 'Not last night, but yesterday afternoon.'

The doctor nodded. 'And tell me, have you had to pass water a lot lately?'

Linda frowned. 'I thought that was normal during pregnancy.'

'It can be in the later months when the baby presses on the bladder. Do you think you have needed to pee more than usual lately?'

'Yes, a bit.'

'And have you noticed any smell?'

'Now you come to mention it, yes, a bit like...fish. But I've had quite a hankering for fish. I can't seem to get enough of it. Could that be what's causing it?'

'We'll see. Do you think you could give me a urine sample?'

'Now?'

'If you could.'

'I'll try.'

He gave her a small plastic bottle and she took it through to the bathroom, returning with it a few moments later, its contents a cloudy, anaemic yellow. She handed it to Glass, who held it up to the light and nodded with a quiet, 'Hmm.'

He unscrewed the lid and sniffed the contents. 'A-ha.'

'What do you think is wrong with me?' she asked.

'Nothing major,' he assured her. 'If I'm right, and I think I am, I suspect you have a urine infection. It's been irritating your bladder giving you the cramping pain and causing you to pee more. Your body's reaction to it is what's making you feel sick. An infection would also be the cause of the smell. A test on the sample will confirm it.' He wrote her name on the bottle and put it in his bag.

'And the bleeding?' she asked.

'Nothing to worry about there either. I could feel an irregularity inside, and I think you've got a little polyp. Having intercourse made it bleed a wee bit. Just make sure when you have sex again, to take it nice and easy.'

'So the baby is fine?'

'The baby is absolutely fine, Linda. You've just had a double whammy of the polyp bleeding and an infection causing pain, and together they've given you a wee bit of a scare.'

Relief at the news that her pregnancy, and her baby were safe, washed over her.

Glass drew out his prescription pad and began scribbling on it. 'I'm going to prescribe some antibiotics,' he said. 'They won't hurt the baby and they'll make you feel better soon. Make sure you take the whole course,

and drink plenty of water.' He handed her the slip of paper and packed his bag.

'Don't worry, Linda. Everything is going to be fine. We'll see you at your next antenatal.' He patted her knee and stood to go. 'Cheerio for now.'

When he opened the bedroom door, Tom, who had been sitting on the top stair, leapt to his feet. 'How is she doctor? Is she okay? Is the baby okay? What's going on?'

'Everything is fine, Mr Lewis. No cause for concern.'

'Is she going to lose the baby? Please, say she isn't—'

'She isn't. What she needs is her medicine, plenty of water to drink and lots of TLC.'

Tom shook Glass's hand vigorously. 'Yes, thank you doctor. I can...I can do that...I can take care of her, can't I, Lind?'

'Then I'll leave her in your capable hands.' Glass started down the stairs, closely followed by Tom.

More effusive thanks and goodbyes, the closing of the door, and Tom was back at her side. 'Can I get you anything? Are you comfortable? Do you need something?'

She calmly gave him the prescription. 'You can go and collect these from the chemist before they close, if you wouldn't mind.'

'Right...right. I can do that. I'll go right now.'

He was halfway through the door when she called him back. 'Tom?'

'Yes my love.'

'You can't go yet.'

'Why not?'

'You're still in your pyjamas.'

Chapter 38

Adam had his work cut out, clearing the weekend's heavy snowfall from around the Land Rover, when he heard the telephone ringing inside the cottage. He stamped his boots on the step, went inside and answered the phone with his customary caution.

'Hello?'

'Why do you always answer the phone as if you expect it to grow teeth and bite you?' said Linda.

'I don't,' he denied.

'Yes you do. Good morning, sweetheart.'

'Good morning to you, too. I'm almost ready, what time do you want me to pick you up?'

He and Linda had arranged to go into town that day. They had planned to have lunch, and she was to take him shopping for new clothes, after she steadfastly refused to launder his checked shirts any more, citing their threadbare, shabby state to be a public embarrassment as they dried on her washing line. He had reluctantly agreed to take her into town and allow her to shop for replacements.

'I'm sorry, Adam, I'm afraid I have to cancel our trip,' she said.

'If you're worried about the snow, Bessie can cope with it.'

'No, it's not that,' she said. 'I haven't been well over the weekend and I don't really feel up to it.'

'Not well? What's wrong?'

'Nothing much, but I'm a bit washed out. Are you very disappointed?'

He gave a small laugh. 'About not going shopping? Not really.'

'I was looking forward to spending the day with you,' she said.

'We can still do that. I'll come round.'

'Will you? That would be lovely.'

He looked out of the window at the snow still surrounding his vehicle. 'It'll take me a wee while to dig Bessie out, but I'll be there as soon as I can. Okay?'

'Okay. See you soon. Bye-bye.'

He replaced the telephone receiver, refitted his cap and returned to his chore.

It took him twenty back aching minutes to release Bessie from the grip of the snow. With Finn sat expectantly on the passenger seat, he turned the ignition key and silently prayed for the battery to not be dead. It fired first time, ejecting its now customary cloud of blue smoke. It took another twenty minutes of careful driving at a snail's pace before he reached Linda's back gate. He climbed out of the vehicle and held the door wide for Finn.

'Are you coming?'

The dog tucked his nose under his paw and stayed put, reluctant to leave the seat he had invested so much of his own body heat in warming.

'Please yourself.'

Adam slammed the door closed, shutting the dog inside. He flicked the latch on the gate and picked his way through a two-foot drift to Linda's back door. He tried the handle. Locked, with the key left in on the inside so he could not use his own.

He tapped his fingers smartly against the glass, and after a few moments' wait, saw movement behind the obscured pane. The key turned and the door opened to reveal Linda in her fluffy pink dressing gown and slippers. She smiled broadly, but weakly. 'Hello darling.'

'Hell's teeth woman, you look like death warmed o'er, what's wrong with you?' he said, shocked by the stark paleness of her face and the dark circles around her dull, sunken eyes.

She opened the door wide and invited him inside. He stamped the snow off his boots and stepped over the threshold.

'I've been a bit poorly over the weekend,' she explained, as he took off his boots on the mat. 'But I'm getting better now.'

'You look dreadful.'

'And you look cold. I'll make you some coffee and warm you up.'

'Do you want me to do it?'

'No. I can manage. I'm not dead yet. Make yourself at home.'

He took off his cap and dropped it on the kitchen table, ruffled his hair and draped his heavy waxed coat over the back of the chair.

'Where's Finn?' she asked, spooning coffee into mugs.

'In the car. He doesn't want to get out.'

'He can't stay out there, it's freezing. Bring him in.'

'He doesn't want to—'

'Then make him. Who's the master, you or him?'

Adam rolled his eyes and tutted as he fitted his boots again, and Linda watched from the window, smiling with amusement, as he practically carried the heavy, unenthusiastic dog from the car and dragged it down the path through the snow.

Once inside, Archie greeted his friend with a sniff and a wag, and the two canine pals took up residence on the rug in front of the gas fire.

Adam heaved off his boots for a second time. 'Happy now?'

She handed him a mug of hot coffee. 'Yep.'

'You look like you should be in bed,' he said. 'You look ready to pass out.'

'I've been in bed all weekend, but it's so boring. I can rest just as well down on the sofa in front of the telly.'

'Why didn't you tell me you were sick? What's wrong? Do you need anything?'

'It's a little infection; it's not serious and no.'

'You look so ghastly pale.'

'I'm just a little tired. Seeing you though has cheered me right up, you're better than any medicine.'

'Is the baby okay?'

'The baby is just fine.'

They went through to the sitting room. 'Come and sit with me and talk to me,' she said, seating herself on the sofa and curling her legs underneath her. She turned down the sound on the television, and they sat together, sipping their hot drinks and making small talk about the horrible weather.

She tugged at the front of his sweater. 'You're wearing your new sweater.'

'Aye, and very nice it is too. Lovely and warm out in all that snow.'

She fingered the cable patterns in the knitted fabric. 'It didn't take you long to get it dirty, though, did it?'

'Ach, it'll wash.'

'When it was clean, the colour suited your eyes. You have very pretty eyes, Adam. Very...expressive. Did you know that?'

'Are you trying to flatter me?'

She giggled softly. 'Yes. Is it working?'

'I'll let you know.'

She took his scratchy, coarse face in her hands, and kissed him tenderly. 'Give me a hug, Adam. I'm still feeling rough and a bit sorry for myself, and I'd really like one.'

He held her close. 'Like this?'

She snuggled up against him as if he were a giant teddy bear. 'Perfect.'

'Has Tom been taking good care of you?'

'Yeah,' she mumbled against his chest. 'A bit too much care sometimes. I wish he wouldn't. It feels like he's smothering me.'

'That's only because he loves you.'

'Hmm, I know. I'm so lucky. I have two gorgeous men falling over themselves to take care of me.'

'Can I get you anything?'

'No, just this,' she said, nestling closer to him.

Suddenly, she bounced back, her hand against her belly. She unfastened her dressing gown, grabbed his hand and pressed it firmly against her cotton covered stomach.

'What?' he said, bemused.

'Shh, wait.' She held his hand in place. Something stirred under her nightshirt. 'There! Did you feel that?'

He frowned in uncertainty. 'I think I did. I felt something like...like a foot under a duvet. Is it the baby?'

'No, you numpty, it's the basket of frogs I keep in my PJs. Of course it's the baby.'

He rested his hand against her again. 'I can't feel it now.'

'No. It's just now and again. He likes to let me know he's still in there. Isn't it marvellous?'

'There! I felt it!' he said. 'Properly this time. It's a miracle. An absolute fucking miracle.'

She opened her eyes and mouth wide in false shock.

'Adam Munro Strachan! Such appalling vulgarity! And in front of your son too. Shame on you.'

He leaned back against the cushions with Linda lying huddled against him, his arms wrapped around her in a protective cocoon.

'I love you,' he breathed into her hair. 'Both of you.'

'Thank you, sweetie,' she whispered. 'That means so much to me.'

'You look better,' said Tom, home from work and greeting his wife with a kiss. 'You have a bit more colour.'

Linda put her hand to her cheek. 'Do I?'

'Hmm, all rosy and blooming.'

'That would be my raging fever,' she said.

He put his arms around her and laid his hands on her abdomen. 'How's the bean?'

'He's just fine.'

'Have you felt anything today?'

'Only hot and sick.'

He reached around her and stole a piece of the carrot she was chopping for the evening meal. 'I meant have you felt any more movement from Oscar?'

'Who's Oscar?'

'I can't keep on calling it the 'bean', can I?'

'No you can't, it's awful. Oscar will do. He's been giving me a few pops and flutters.'

He bent and picked up something from the floor under the table - Adam's cap. 'Ah, I see Adam was here. He left his hat. Blimey, it's filthy.' He put his nose to the fabric and sniffed. 'Phew, it's pongy too. What a niff.'

She snatched it from him. 'Don't be rude, it's his favourite.'

'What did he want?'

'When I didn't take him shopping this morning as we'd arranged, he popped in to make sure I was all right. Wasn't that sweet of him?' She folded the cap and tucked it into the pocket of her anorak, hanging on a hook beside the door. 'I'll give that back to him when I see him next.'

Tom snatched another piece of carrot and popped it into his mouth. 'Is he still looking for a job?'

She resumed her chopping. 'He didn't say, but I think so, why?'

'We need a labourer. Do you think he'll be interested?'

Linda grimaced. 'Working for Bill Paterson? The man who threatened to have him arrested? The man he threatened to shoot? I don't think so.'

'I'm sure Bill will be willing to forgive and forget.'

'And I'm sure Adam won't. Bill evicted him from the Castle, remember and in a not too pleasant way. I don't think he'll ever get over that.'

'A job's a job, Lind. Beggars can't be choosers.'

Adam didn't notice his cap was missing until he got halfway home. It dawned on him when he realised his head felt unusually cold. He considered he might have lost it while digging in the snow, but really had no idea where it could be.

'Bugger it,' he said to Finn. 'It looks as if I'm going to have to buy a new one. It took me years to get it just right.'

After a couple of good nights' sleep, and completion of her course of antibiotics, Linda felt considerably

better. Most of the snow had melted away as quickly as it had arrived, and the roads were almost clear. She rang Adam to rearrange their shopping trip. From her back garden gate, he picked her up in the Land Rover.

'Are you sure about this,' she said, unnerved by the bad tempered rattling of the diesel engine. 'Wouldn't you rather go in the Volvo? This old girl sounds like she won't get us to the end of the lane.'

He patted the dashboard. 'She's never let me down yet. Hop in.'

She climbed in and fastened her seat belt. 'I have something of yours,' she said, and tugged the rolled up tweed cap from her anorak pocket.

He took it from her and examined it, as if to confirm it was indeed his. 'Where did you find it?'

'Tom found it under the chair in the kitchen. It must have fallen off the table when you were here the other day.' She took it back from him and put it on. 'I might get a cap like this. They are supposed to be back in fashion. How does it suit me?'

He laughed and snatched it back. 'It doesn't.' He fitted the hat firmly onto his own head, crunched the vehicle into gear and they lurched off on their shopping expedition.

'Have you had any luck with the job search yet?' Linda asked as they ate their lunch sandwiches on a park bench. She tossed a fragment of her crust to an expectant hungry duck. It nipped up the morsel and waited for more.

'Not yet,' replied Adam, taking a drink from a bottle of diet cola. The fizzy liquid caused him to burp delicately behind his hand and excuse himself.

'What type of job are you looking for?'

'I'm willing to consider anything legal.'

'Would it lower your expectations too much to be a labourer on a building site?' she asked, tentatively.

'I doubt it. Everyone has to start at the bottom sometime. Do you know of a job going?'

She shifted uncomfortably on the bench. 'Erm, yes, I do. At the Castle. Tom told me about it yesterday.'

She watched his face closely, awaiting his reaction.

A deep frown knitted his brow and his lips formed a tight pout as he dropped the remains of his sandwich into the paper bag and rolled the top closed.

'Are you taking the piss, Linda? 'Cause if you are, I might have to say something rather unpleasant to you, and pregnant or no, you'll have a long walk home.'

'No sweetie, I'm not. You said you were bored and wanted a job. There's a job going with Tom's firm. Ergo—'

'I'm not that bored,' he said, still scowling. 'I'll never be that bored.'

'Hey, don't shoot the messenger. You're looking for a job; they need a labourer to start in a couple of weeks. It'll be hard work but the pay is pretty good and it will get you out of the house.'

He huffed derogatorily, not needing to say anything. The set of his face told her everything - he was incensed at her proposal, just as she expected he would be.

'I told Tom you might not be interested,' she said.

'Why would he even suggest it?' he glowered. 'He knows the rape of my family home is a painful, touchy subject still. Did he do it so that he could rub my nose in it? I suppose he's having a really good titter about it behind my back.'

'That's a horrid thing to say, Adam. Of course he didn't. He was trying to help. It might not have been appropriate, but at least he's trying.'

He snorted a sharp, dismissive, 'Bah!'

'I don't know whether you've noticed, sweetie, but things have altered considerably in the last few weeks. Tom has completely changed his opinion of you. Since I've been pregnant he no longer sees you as a threat. In fact, he quite likes you now. He said as much. 'He's not a bad bloke,' he said. From him, and considering the circumstances, that's praise indeed.'

Adam's frown unknitted a little. 'He said that?'

'Yes, he did.'

'Is this the same Tom Lewis who wanted to strangle me on my sick bed and smash my face to a pulp?'

She smiled. 'He thought he had cause to then. Now he doesn't.'

Adam considered the unexpected information. 'Well, I suppose that's a relief of sorts,' he said. 'I've been walking on eggshells for months trying not to give him the slightest cause to batter me senseless.'

'So will you consider the job?'

He shook his head and opened his sandwich bag. 'Nope. I don't think so.' He tossed a piece of bread to the still waiting duck, and broke off a chunk for himself.

'Okay.' Linda folded her paper bag into a neat square. 'As you're going to have all this free time on your hands, how about you come with me to my ante-natal class on Friday? We'll be talking about breast feeding. There'll be pictures...and I think there'll be a demonstration.'

She had to slap him firmly between the shoulder blades as he choked on his sandwich

Chapter 39

'How far do you want to walk?' Adam said, fastening the back garden gate.

'I can walk any distance,' Linda said. 'I'm perfectly fine. But I'd rather stick to the smoother path, just to be on the safe side.'

'Okey doke.'

He took Linda by the hand and in the late spring sunlight, they set out along the lane. The dogs trotting ahead.

They turned down the path where it split off from the lane, and followed it until they reached the fork in the tarmac road.

'Which way?' Adam asked.

'I would like to see what they've done up at the Castle. Tom said it's coming along rather splendidly...a really good job.'

Adam pursed his lips and frowned. 'I'd rather not, if you don't mind.'

'Then you can wait here for me if you want. I won't be long.' She set off at a brisk pace up the road towards the building site. Adam looked after her for a moment, before running to catch her up.

'I suppose...if you really want to,' he said.

She took his hand and held on to it as they walked.

'Hey, Tom, isn't that your missus down there?'

Aiden Barrett pointed through the gap where the window used to be, at the two figures in the courtyard three storeys below. Tom left off sanding a newly completed wooden window frame, and strolled over to look. 'I believe it is,' he said.

'Who's that with her?'

'He's a friend of hers.'

'They must be close friends; they're holding hands. You want to watch him.'

'He's just looking after her.'

'I wouldn't let another guy hold my wife's hand like that.' Aiden peered out of the hole again, and pushed his hand back on his head to scratch at his sweaty hairline. 'I recognise that bloke...it's whatsisname...who used to live here...' He snapped his fingers. 'Adam Strachan...'

He was talking to an empty room; Tom was already on his way down the staircase.

'What are you two doing here?' Tom marched toward Adam and Linda, the gravel crunching under his heavy work boots. 'I thought you said you never wanted to set foot in here again.'

'Linda wanted to see how work was progressing,' explained Adam. 'I couldn't care less one way or the other.'

'Yes you could,' she said, squeezing his hand. 'You want to see just as much as I do. Can we go inside?'

'Not yet,' said Tom. 'It's still too dangerous. Sorry.'

'It's been almost a year. You must have done plenty we can see in safety.'

'Sorry. I can't take the risk. If something should fall on you, it would be my job for sure.'

She looked disappointed, but nodded her acceptance of his explanation. He should know what was safe and what wasn't.

Adam looked up the outside wall. Nearly all the ivy had been stripped away, and the walls looked stark and bare where the rendering had been removed. Scaffolding clung to the wall like an iron exoskeleton.

Without its green leafy cladding, Adam could clearly see the window of his old room staring out like a blank eye.

'Can we go?' he said. 'I've seen enough.'

'Let's walk around the back first.' Linda tugged at his hand and led him across the courtyard, past skips filled

with chunks of masonry and waste wood. Tom and the dogs followed close behind.

'Is it open?' she asked when they reached the cellar door from which the padlock hung loose. Tom tried the handle, it turned under his hand and the door creaked open.

'Mind the steps,' she said, echoing the warning Adam had given her the first time she stepped through the door.

All three went inside. It was as dark and damp as the day Adam had left it. The fireplace stood cold and dead; unused since he had last lit it the previous summer. All the makeshift kitchen units were gone, except for the cracked stone sink and its perpetually dripping tap. The room was dim and empty and hollow. Tom flicked the switch on the wall. Nothing happened. The power had not been reconnected.

He explained that, after Adam's eviction, the cellar had been used as temporary storage for sheets of drywall and bags of plaster, but the room was so damp they were spoiling and had to be removed.

'God only knows how you managed here, Adam,' he said, with respect. 'It ruined a 25 kilo bag of plaster in less than a fortnight. It's no wonder you got sick.'

Linda pressed Adam's hand. She had seen the tears standing in his eyes. 'I can't believe I wanted to stay here,' he said. 'How could I have been so fucking stupid?'

Tom stood back as his wife hugged her friend. 'Because you love the place,' she said. 'It's in your heart, your soul...your blood.'

He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. 'Aye, perhaps. Or perhaps I was just an idiot.'

He left her close hold and wandered slowly through the door at the far end of the room and into what used to be his bedroom. He reappeared moments later. 'Let's go,' he said, heading directly for the exit. 'It means nothing to me now.'

Linda gave Tom a quick goodbye kiss, and chased after Adam. On the road home, as they passed the grassed area, she came to a halt.

'Look, there,' she said in a low urgent whisper, tugging at Adam's sleeve and pointing.

About thirty feet away, in front of a rhododendron bush, the peacock strutted, defiantly bobbing the little crest of feathers on its head.

The couple stood still and watched. The bird lifted its head from pecking at the ground and eyed them, measuring the threat. Sensing none, it stretched its bright blue neck and opened its mouth, cawing loudly at them. Its tail began to rise and with a few quick shakes, opened into full resplendence. Linda gasped. 'Oh my God, it's so beautiful. Who on Earth would ever want to harm a gorgeous creature like that?'

In answer to her question, a yapping white and tan blur, swiftly followed by a lolloping black form, shot past her legs and towards the displaying bird.

'No!' she yelled. 'Leave it!'

Neither dog paid her any heed. The peacock ceased its display and fled into the depths of the dense shrubbery, leaving behind two of its ornamental tail feathers. The dogs, unable to follow, barked loudly after their retreating quarry.

Linda ran over to the animals. 'Shut up! Leave it alone.' She grabbed both their collars and after salvaging the shed feathers, dragged the dogs back to where Adam stood, a wide, self-satisfied smirk across his face.

'I suppose you're happy now?' she said, clipping leads onto the dogs' collars.

'It's no more than the blasted beast deserves,' he grinned. 'It'll do for a start.' He took Finn's lead from her hand. 'Never mind, boys. Better luck next time, eh?'

'Why did you make me go back there?' Adam said, when he Linda were sitting on the wooden bench in her back garden, drinking coffee in the late morning sunshine. Both dogs lay stretched out on the lawn, their

bellies to the warmth and their incident with the large, blue bird already forgotten.

'I wanted you to realise how much better off you are now,' she said, examining the lustrous peacock feathers closely. 'You have a dry, warm home, two homes if you count this one, and enough money to live comfortably on. You have the Oak Wood to walk in and your peacock to torment you. You are indeed, a privileged man, Mr Strachan.' She tickled his chin with the feather.

'Aye, I am,' he said with a contemplative smile, and nodding agreement. 'And I have you to thank for it. If I hadn't met you, if you hadn't pushed me to move, if you hadn't bothered to care, I don't know where I would be now. Probably in a box six feet underground.'

'And wouldn't you rather be here with me, than an all you can eat banquet for worms and beetles?'

He took her hand and kissed it. 'Oh aye, there is no contest there. I have a lot to be grateful for, Linda. I owe you everything...I wish there was some way I can repay you.'

She stretched her back and rubbed her stomach as the baby moved inside her, pushing its tiny foot against her ribs.

'You might regret saying that,' she said. 'Because I intend to make you my official babysitter-in-chief.'

'And I will undertake my duties with the utmost pleasure, ma'am.'

'Do you know the first thing about babies?'

'Not the slightest. But I'm more than willing to learn something new.'

'Then I shall have to buy you a book.'

She took his hand and held it against her stomach. To both their delights, the baby pushed back.

Chapter 40

Spring, in full emergent glory, drifted towards summer. Flowers bloomed, birds sang, trees leafed and blossomed and the weather gradually warmed. Linda's belly grew a little larger and a little more cumbersome, but even when her back ached and her ankles swelled, she retained her good spirits.

Tom's work at the Castle continued apace as the completion date neared, and Adam, his objective to find work put on hold, took it upon himself to fill his time looking after the mother-to-be. She in turn, made good use of his presence at the house, putting him to work in the garden, weeding the flowerbeds, pruning her rose bushes and giving the lawn its first mowing of the year.

She worked him hard, sending him up a ladder to clean her windows, and clear moss from her guttering. Although not happy with heights, he obliged her without complaint, knowing full well that if he didn't do it, in her obstinacy, she would. His efforts were always duly and amply rewarded.

'Did you know it's a year to the day since I met you,' she said as they enjoyed a steady afternoon walk down the Oak Wood path.

'Is that all?' he said. 'It feels like I've known you all my life.'

She laughed. 'I tend to have that effect on people. Once known, never forgotten.'

They reached the wooden bench and Linda lowered herself onto it. 'Sit by me,' she said, and patted the seat beside her. He sat, leaning forward, his arms resting on his knees. She laid her hand on his back, feeling the tightness of his muscles through the fabric of his shirt.

Through the busy twittering of the small birds, the harsh, strident cry of the errant peacock rang out.

'That wretched bird knows I'm here,' he said. 'He's mocking me.'

Linda stroked his back. 'He's doing nothing of the sort. You're being paranoid. He's just lonely. He's calling for a mate. He needs a lady peacock in his life.'

'Peahen,' he informed her. 'Lady peacocks are called peahens.'

'One of them, then. Where can we get one? We should get one and they can have pea-sex and have lots of little peababies.'

'That's all I need - dozens more of the screaming beasts roaming the wood! I should have brought my gun. I'm going to hunt that bugger down if it's the last thing I ever do.'

'Then I wish it a long and prosperous life.'

The dogs caught a scent in the air and raced away through the undergrowth. 'They've gone to find rabbits,' she said, recalling her first meeting with Adam, and Archie's foray behind the private fence.

He didn't answer, seemingly deep in thought, turning his cap idly around in his hands.

'Penny for them,' she said, putting her hand to his bare head and fingering his hair. He leaned against the back of the bench with a sigh.

'I was just going o'er everything that's happened o'er the last year,' he said.

'And?'

'It's like looking through pictures in a scrapbook. I can't believe I've...we've been through so much, and come out the other side relatively unscathed.'

'Do you have any regrets?'

He inhaled, held it for moment and exhaled deeply, shaking his head. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I regret having to leave the Castle; it was my home for so long, but it would have fallen down around my ears if I'd stayed. At least now, it's being put to good use. I regret having caused all that trouble between you and Tom, almost wrecking your marriage, but it all came right in the end. I regret the incident with the gun, having acted so stupidly, frightening and upsetting you like I did, but

you were generous and forgave me, even though I didn't deserve it. All in all, each regret has had a silver lining to it, so, I can't complain.'

She leaned against him and he put his arm around her shoulders. 'And I fell in love with you,' he said. 'And you're having my baby. How could I regret any of that?'

'I once told Tom that I loved you, but I said I wasn't *in* love with you, that they were two separate things,' she said. 'I don't think that was exactly true. I think I've always been in love with you. Probably from the first day I met you, when you lifted me off the fence.'

'You're an easy woman to love. Tom's a lucky man to have you.'

'So are you,' she grinned.

He grinned back. 'Aye, that I am.' He hugged her tightly and kissed her. He stood and put out his hands to pull her to her feet. 'Come on, Miss Piggy, I think you've walked far enough today.'

When they reached home, he settled her on the sofa before going to the kitchen to make her a cup of tea. He returned to find her asleep, her feet up on the seat and her hands draped protectively across her stomach. He gently lifted her feet and sat, resting her legs across his lap. He drank his tea and watched TV while she dozed. He was still there when Tom returned from work.

When she woke from her nap, she found the two men already busy in the kitchen, working well together to prepare dinner. They insisted they were well able to manage the job between them, and she, relegated to being a mere observer, took a seat at the table to oversee the operation. Her heart swelled with pride as she listened to the men's jovial conversation, and observed how well they co-operated in their task. The resulting meal was more than acceptable, and she declared her satisfaction with their efforts.

After the dishes had been washed, dried and put away, the trio settled in the living room to watch the TV news and a movie. After half an hour of the light-

hearted romantic comedy, both men began to fidget in their boredom.

'Fancy a bevvie, Adam?' Tom said.

Adam looked at him, surprised by the offer.

'Erm...aye, I wouldn't mind that at all.'

'Come on then.' Tom got to his feet. 'First round's on me. Get your coat.'

Adam hesitated. 'I thought you meant a beer from the fridge. Are you wanting to go to the pub? With me?'

Tom shrugged nonchalantly. 'Yeah, why not? Where else can we get a decent pint?' From the closet under the stairs, he brought their jackets, handing Adam his. 'Where do you fancy,' he said, shrugging on his coat. 'The White Lion or the Hunter's Arms?'

'Either, I don't mind.'

'Where's my coat?' Linda chipped in.

'You're not coming,' said Tom. 'This is just for us blokes. A busy, noisy pub is no place for a pregnant woman. You watch your girlie film, put your feet up and rest.'

'That's not fair!' she protested.

'See you later, love,' he said, and kissed her left cheek. 'We won't be late.'

'Cheerio,' said Adam, and kissed her right.

'Sexist pigs,' she complained sulkily, and dropped down onto the sofa, her arms folded beneath her swelling bosom.

In the public bar of the Hunter's Arms, Adam commandeered a table, and Tom carried a tray of drinks from the bar. He set two pints of ale, along with their requisite whisky chasers, on the table, together with a bag of cheese and onion crisps for each of them. Sitting comfortably, he raised his whisky glass in a toast.

'Cheers, Adam. Good health.'

Adam did likewise. 'Cheers, Tom. And you.'

They swallowed their spirits in one swift gulp, the alcohol burning their throats. Tom immediately followed it with a long draught of his beer. He smacked his lips with satisfaction. 'Man, I needed that.'

Adam also took a long drink. 'Aye,' he said. 'It's been a good long while since I've been in here. I'd forgotten how good a fine draught ale can be.'

Tom ripped open his bag of crisps, plucked one out and put it in his mouth. 'Are you still looking for work?' he said.

'I was,' said Adam, 'but not just now.'

'Linda told me you didn't fancy the labourer's job at the Castle.'

'Er...no. Thanks for the offer, but it would have been rubbing salt into a pretty raw wound. Apart from which, I don't think Paterson and I would really have got on after our last encounter.'

'Maybe not. And I don't really blame you. He can be a bit of a bastard to work for.'

They raised their glasses and drank in unison.

'Why are you not looking any more?' Tom enquired.

'My circumstances have unexpectedly changed.'

'Changed how?'

'It turned out the need for cash wasn't quite as urgent as I thought. I can afford to put it off until after Linda has the baby.'

Tom chewed on another crisp, offering one to Adam, who declined as he was attempting, without too much success, to tear open his own bag.

'You've really been looking after her,' said Tom, 'and I want you to know how much I appreciate it.'

Adam gave up on the crisp packet. 'It's been an absolute pleasure, but, I tell you, it's been gey hard work. She's too independent for her own good that one. She likes my company sure enough, but she won't let me to do anything without pleading a case, not even mowing the lawn.'

'You must really have begged to be allowed to clean the upstairs windows then.'

'In that case, *she* asked *me*. Even she's not daft enough to go up a ladder in her condition.'

'Don't you believe it. Don't ever tell Linda she can't do anything. She'll do it just to spite you.'

Tom took a mouthful of his drink. Adam did the same.

The door to the bar opened and a man and a woman entered. They watched the couple take up a position at the bar. The woman put her hand under the man's jacket and around his back and put her face close to his neck. The man whispered something in the woman's ear and she giggled coyly.

'I'll lay Lincoln Odds they're not married,' observed Tom.

Adam chuckled quietly and sipped at his beer. They sat in silence as they observed the couple at the bar. When they moved away, Tom said, 'You've been sleeping with Linda haven't you?'

Until that moment, Adam had been enjoying the fine ale. Now it turned to diesel in his mouth. He swallowed hard to rid himself of the foul liquid.

'I know you have,' Tom continued. 'I'm not blind...or stupid...and I know my wife. You do know she promised me on your life that she wouldn't ever sleep with you again, don't you?'

Adam kept his eyes on his glass. 'Erm...'

'You don't need to bother to deny it. It's as plain as a pikestaff what's been going on.'

'I wasn't going to deny it. I was going to say, I didn't know she had made a promise until it was already too late.'

'It didn't stop you carrying on though?'

Adam swallowed. 'No. She's very hard to resist.'

Tom gave a low laugh. 'That she is.'

'What are you going to do? Are you still going to make good on your promise to give me a thorough belting?'

Tom considered his half-full glass. 'I have to admit, I'm nowhere near as pissed off as I thought I would be, so...I haven't decided yet?'

Adam lifted his glass to his lips. 'When you do make up your mind, I'd be grateful if you'd give me a wee bit of a warning first, just so I can brace myself. Or preferably, maybe you could give me a head start.'

'How long would you need?'

'About three weeks.'

Tom snorted. 'It's a deal.'

'I'm not really that keen to have my teeth knocked out the back of my neck,' Adam said. 'But if it comes to it, I give you my word, I'll take it like a man.'

Tom chuckled and sipped at his drink. 'I'm sure you will.'

'So if you knew,' said Adam, 'why didn't you say anything before?'

'Quite simply because I love Linda, bones and soul. She is my life and always will be, whatever she does. I can't be without her, and if it means sharing her with you, so be it. And also because I've seen how deeply fond she is of you, you mean a lot to her. It's a big wide circle. You make her happy, she makes me happy, I make her happy, she makes you happy. I can't say that you make me happy, or vice versa, but you get the picture. Round and round.'

'So what are you going to do?'

Tom shrugged. 'Nothing. I think I'll put it on hold for the time being. For Linda's sake, not yours.'

Adam felt relief wash through him. 'That's very generous of you.'

Tom took another mouthful of ale, held it and then swallowed it down. 'There's something important I need to ask you, Adam, and I want the God's honest truth from you, you owe me that much.'

'If I know what it is, you'll get it.'

He looked him directly in the eye. 'Is the baby mine?'

Adam didn't have to think about his answer, even though he knew it wasn't the truth. 'Aye, it's yours.'

'How do you know?'

'Because at the time she fell pregnant, I was in no fit state to...to perform. I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to.'

Their eyes remained locked across the table and Tom nodded slowly. Adam had confirmed what Linda had already told him. Liars all.

'That's all I needed to know,' he said.

He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. 'Now we've got that little bugbear out of the way, do you

fancy something a bit stronger? You look like you could use it. Anyone would think you've had a bit of a shock.'

Adam nodded. 'I think I could use another wee dram, aye.'

'Good,' Tom beamed. 'Because it's your round.'

Chapter 41

At half past midnight, Linda heard the back gate slam and the clattering of keys at the rear door. The door swung open, and the two men fell in through it, each of them too inebriated to stand up without the support of the other.

She tore into them before they were properly over the threshold.

'What the hell time do you call this? A pint, you said, one pint, not drinking yourselves bloody legless. Look at the state of you both, and you, Thomas Stephen Lewis with work tomorrow.'

'We're in trouble,' Tom whispered audibly to his partner in crime. 'She used my full name. That's never a good sign.'

'You're pathetic, the pair of you! Away to your beds,' she chivvied. 'Go on now!'

Their expressions changed to ones of sheepish contrition, the men silently edged their way past her towards the stairs. She heard Tom whisper something, and both he and Adam broke into hushed sniggers, like schoolboys having heard a dirty joke.

'Away!' she urged, and pushed them along.

The men staggered up the stairs. She followed on a few minutes later, having locked the doors and windows and put off the lights. She found them both in the spare bedroom, sitting on the bed together, attempting to strip off each other's trousers. She grabbed Tom by the arm and pulled him out of the room.

'In your own bed, you daft bugger,' she said, propelling him through the bedroom door. She returned to Adam, now down to his boxers.

'I expected better from you, Adam Munro Strachan. Fancy getting yourself into such a state. I thought you would be more responsible. I'm ashamed of you, I am.'

'You sound very Welsh,' he slurred, and hiccupped. 'And you used *my* full name too. Am I in trouble as well?'

He fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. 'I think I might have had a wee bit too much to drink, Lindy. My fingers have gone all numb. I can't seem to—'

She slapped his hands away, undid the buttons and took his shirt from him. He pulled off his socks, and she turned down the duvet.

'Get in there and sleep it off,' she ordered.

He gave her a lecherous grin. 'Why don't you get it in with me? I'll raise the old flagpole and-hic-we can have a quickie.' He giggled inanely.

'I wouldn't waste my time. The state you're in, you couldn't raise a smile.'

'Aren't you going to at least tuck me in?'

'Gah! Go to sleep.'

She turned out the light and left him, returning to her own bedroom and her husband, face down on the bed, stark naked, already passed out.

'Bloody useless lumps the pair of you.'

She slapped the bare backside of his comatose form.

'Get-over!'

She pushed and rolled his dead weight to his side of the bed, covered him with the duvet, climbed under it herself and put out the bedside lamp.

In the final moments before sleep took her, a smile crept across her face as she thought of both her men being back under her roof at the same time, albeit senseless. She didn't have time to remember whether she had enough aspirins in stock to cope with the next morning's hangovers.

The 6.00 a.m. alarm encouraged her out of her slumber. Only half awake, she reached out for Tom, lying on his stomach, one arm under his pillow, the other dangling over the edge of the bed. That hand rose like a puppet on a string's, and slapped down on the clock, silencing the piercing beep.

He groaned groggily and laid a hand on her waist, moving it over her buttock towards her thigh. It took her no more than a second to realise the hand couldn't be Tom's. It was on the wrong side, and his were all accounted for.

She rolled onto her back and turned her head, horrified to find herself face to face with Adam, still asleep, the hint of smile on his lips. She dug him hard in the chest with her elbow.

He grimaced and huffed, but did not wake. She repeated the action, harder.

'Ow, what?' he mumbled, blinking his eyes open to see her bright blue orbs glaring at him.

'Shhh,' she hissed, removing his hand and pulling the duvet up high over his head, hiding him from view as Tom stirred, moaned and stretched into wakefulness.

'Good morning darling,' she said brightly, pressing her lips to the skin of his back. 'Time to get up and face the day.'

He grumbled and sat up, raking at his scalp with his fingers.

'How's your head? Still attached?'

He replied with an unintelligible groan.

'Serves you right.'

He stood, and scratched at his crotch as he trod unsteadily out of the dimly lit bedroom. Moments later she heard him urinating in the toilet, and farting brazenly.

She pulled the duvet off Adam. 'What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?' she whispered harshly at him.

The lavatory flushed.

'Shit! Don't move.' She threw the duvet over him again.

Tom ambled back into the bedroom and rummaged in the top drawer of the chest. 'Are there some clean boxers in here, love? I can't see. I need to put the light on.'

Before she could object, he flicked on the light to poke around in the drawer some more, swearing at the

light acupuncture his pickled onion eyes, before plunging the room back into blessed dimness. The sound of the running shower muffled when he closed the bathroom door.

Linda removed the duvet once more, and pushed Adam hard. 'Get out! Get out now, before he sees you.'

With his escape route clear, Adam tiptoed past the bathroom and ducked into the spare room, closing the door behind him.

Downstairs, Linda cooked breakfast.

Upstairs, shaved, dressed, and ready to eat, Tom rapped on the door of Adam's sanctuary. 'Come on, mate, there's no point hiding in there. I don't care how rough you feel, it's time to face the music.'

Inside his bedroom, Adam lay spread-eagled across the bed, fearing if he moved too quickly, his head might detach and float off like a balloon, leaving his eyeballs behind on the bed.

Tom attacked his breakfast like a man possessed. It had always been his tried and tested cure for a hangover - plenty of fried food, along with strong coffee and aspirins.

'Adam certainly can put the drink away,' he said through a mouthful of fried egg. 'I bet he's got a head on him this morning...'

'And so he should,' said Linda, cleaning out the frying pan.

'It was a good night - beer, darts, more beer, chasers...'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, getting smashed like that. At least you didn't have to drive.'

At that moment, Adam appeared in the kitchen doorway, bleary eyed and dishevelled.

'Aha,' said Tom, pointing at him with a fork. 'Speak of the devil—'

'Good grief!' Linda pulled out a chair for him at the table. 'Sit down, before you fall down.' She placed a

plate of bacon and eggs before him. 'Get that inside you.'

He groaned weakly and pushed the plate away. 'I'm not sure I can handle that, but I wouldn't mind some coffee, strong and black please...and some aspirins if you've got any.'

Tom took possession of the rejected plate and stabbed at the bacon, declaring; 'Waste not, want not.'

Twenty minutes later, Tom had rammed his lunchbox into his backpack and kissed his wife. 'Bye, love. Look after yourself.' With a nod towards Adam, he whispered in her ear, 'He looks worse than I feel, and that's saying something.' With a last peck to her lips, he left for work.

As soon as he was out of sight, and earshot, Linda turned her narrowed eyes onto Adam, sipping at his second cup of hot, strong coffee and rubbing at his itchy throbbing eyes

'Just what the hell did you think you were doing, Adam?'

'I'm sorry?' he queried blearily.

'You were in our bed, for crying out loud!'

He massaged his unshaven cheek. 'Honestly, Lind, I have no idea how I got there. I must have got up in the night to pee, and still being a wee bit pished, got into the wrong bed.'

'And you seriously expect me to believe that?' She folded her arms crossly. 'I'm not really as green as I'm cabbage looking you know.'

'It's the truth,' he insisted. 'I cross my heart.' He waved his hands over his chest.

She scowled her dismissal of his questionable penitence and he looked a picture of innocence as he drained his coffee cup and wiped his mouth with his hand. He pushed his chair back as he stood, scraping it on the linoleum, fitted it tidily under the table and sidled up to her, his hands in his pockets.

'I can't see why you are making such vociferous objections,' he said, leaning close. 'If memory serves me

right, I think it was you who made the suggestion of 'three in a bed' in the first place, didn't you?'

He winked salaciously and planted a kiss on her cheek, before treading his way upstairs to take a shower and make himself feel at least part way human again.

Too astonished to reply, she remained rooted to the spot, her arms folding tighter with indignation.

Chapter 42

The days began to lengthen and warm, and spring stretched inexorably into summer. With good weather forecast for the bank holiday weekend, Tom decided it was time to break out the barbecue and invite friends around. It could be the last chance he and Linda would have to entertain before the baby arrived.

The afternoon was fine and sunny, and the turnout for the party, good – twenty people in all, each of them contributing generously to the wine, beer or snack supply. Most of the guests already knew each other, and Linda made introductions to those who did not.

'You have a lot of friends,' said Adam, looking at the sea of faces. Linda had extended the invitation to include him, and although at first reluctant to attend, he relented at her insistence.

'Some of them are Tom's workmates and their wives,' she said. 'Some are old friends, and those four over there are neighbours. Tom likes a party. I wish the garden were bigger. There's never enough room.' She pointed at Adam's beer bottle. 'Are you alright with that?'

'Fine.'

'I hate to leave you on your own, but I really need to talk to people.'

'You go ahead and mingle,' he said. 'I've promised to help Tom later when the barbecue's ready.'

'Big men make fire, cook meat,' she said, and giggled. Still wearing her smile, she approached a chatting couple.

Adam picked peanuts from a bowl and studied the people around him, huddled in their talking, laughing groups. He recognised none of them, and apart from one man who asked him to pass a bottle of lager, no-one spoke to him or acknowledged his presence.

'Who's that man over there by the table, he looks familiar?'

'Which one?'

'The tall, handsome one standing by the table.'
Barbara McLeod made a tic-like movement with her head and rolled her eyes, indicating Adam.

'Oh, he's a very good friend of mine,' said Linda

'He's very attractive. I'm sure I know him.'

'I'll introduce you.' She took Barbara by the hand and led her over to where Adam was standing.

'Adam,' she said. 'This is Barbara McLeod, one of my oldest friends. Barbara, this is Adam Strachan.' The two shook hands.

'I was just saying to Linda, you look familiar,' said Barbara. 'Have we met before?'

Adam shook his head. 'I don't think so.'

Barbara narrowed her eyes, clearly going through her repertoire of acquaintances. Then her eyebrows rose. 'Yes, I do know you – Adam Strachan, of course. It's all coming back to me now. It was a long time ago, ten years, maybe more. There was an event up at the Castle, back when it was somewhere to be seen. You lived there, didn't you? Yes, I remember you.' She turned to Linda. 'I was still with Donald then and it was one of those Rotarian fundraising dinners he was so fond of...a Burns Supper I think it was. It was a marvellous do, all the men were in kilts and the ladies wore evening dresses, there was a piper and everything.' She turned back to Adam. 'You were with someone then...I forget her name...oh, what was it now?'

Adam cleared his throat and glanced at Linda, who was watching his face closely. 'Elise,' he murmured.

Barbara, pleased at having winkled out the information, nodded. 'Ah, yes, Elise. Such a lovely woman. Are you still together? Is she here?'

'No, we're not together.'

His intense discomfort at having that particular aspect of his past dredged up did not go unnoticed by Linda. She took Barbara by the elbow, and none too gently, dragged her towards a man in a Pringle sweater, helping

himself to second glass of wine. 'Barbara, I don't think you've met Iain McKay. He's an architect you know. Not only is he wickedly clever, he knows anyone who's anyone. You two should get on famously.'

When she left the newly introduced couple to return to Adam, he was nowhere to be seen. She searched all the faces in the garden, peeped through the window into the shed, and even checked out in the lane. He seemed to have disappeared. The Land Rover was still parked in its space, so wherever he had gone, he had gone on foot.

'Tom, have you seen Adam?' she asked of her husband, deftly using a pair of tongs to turn sausages and burgers on the grill.

'Not recently, no, and I could really use his help here. He said he would—'

But he was already talking to himself.

She asked around some more, to be informed that Adam had been seen entering the house a few minutes previously. She made her excuses and left the party to look for him. After scouring each room downstairs without finding him, she climbed halfway up the staircase and called up.

'Adam!' Sweetheart, are you up there?'

Receiving no reply, she continued up onto the landing. The door to the spare bedroom stood ajar. Peeping through it, she could see him sitting on the bed, leaning against the headboard, feet up on the counterpane, beer bottle still in his hand. She pushed open the door, regarded his miserable face, and crawled onto the bed to sit beside him.

'I was only gone for a minute. I came back and you'd vanished. What are you doing up here? Tom's fretting over his burgers.'

'I shouldn't have come today,' he said, staring at his bottle. 'They're your friends, not mine. I have no place here.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It's my fault; I just wanted you to be part of everything...to know our friends.'

'I'm not good at socialising. I prefer to be...private.'
He took a swig of the beer.

'It's not just that is it?' she said. 'It's what Barbara said to you. I could see it on your face. If I'd known she was going to be so indiscreet, I would never have introduced you to her.'

He leaned his head against the headboard. 'You can't be responsible for what other people say.'

'No, I s'pose not, but I am sorry.' She took his hand in hers and put his knuckles to her lips. 'I forced you to come here when you didn't want to come, and you've been made very uncomfortable. I won't do it again. I should have respected your privacy. You don't have to come back down if you don't want to.'

'You should go back,' he said. 'You'll be missed.'

'No I won't, not yet. I'll sit with you a while and keep you company...if that's alright with you.' She packed a pillow behind her back for support.

He took a mouthful of beer from the neck of the bottle and swallowed it. He held it out to her; she declined.

'Aren't you going to ask me about Elise?' he said.

'If you want to tell me, that's okay, but I won't pry. It's your past and none of my business.'

He leaned his head against the polished wooden headboard and turned his eyes to the ceiling. 'Elise and I were going to be married,' he said.

'Were? What happened?'

'We'd already been engaged for two years and the wedding and honeymoon had all been arranged, and then my father had the temerity to have a heart attack and die. It knocked us all for six.'

She squeezed his hand, remembering her own father's death in a similar manner. 'I'm so sorry,' she said.

'When he died, the Castle died with him, and so did my future. His legacy to us, his widow and children, was a large, rambling house, falling down around our ears because he wouldn't pay for repairs. The tenants and farms paid next to no rent to cover expenses. Add to that the punitive amount of inheritance tax to be paid,

and the debts he had managed to rack up, including a second mortgage nobody knew about, and the money just evaporated. And along with it went Elise.'

'She didn't stand by you at all?'

'No. It wasn't in her 'life plan' to be married to a pauper. She cancelled the wedding, gave me the ring back, and walked away without so much as a backward glance. Last I heard, she'd married some mega-wealthy businessman Lord Something-or-other, and lives a life of pampered luxury in the Bahamas.'

'You must have been heartbroken.'

'To put it mildly. And it all went rapidly downhill from thereon in.'

'What happened?'

'After Elise dumped me, my siblings fled, taking what they could with them, and my mother followed my father two years later. I was left at the Castle on my own. I couldn't pay the dues from the monies available, so I had to sell the contents of the house, starting at the top and working my way down. Piece by piece it went...paintings, antiques, furniture...even the bath taps. Gradually, room by room, my living space got smaller and smaller, until I had nowhere to go but the cellar, where you found me...cold and miserable and church mouse poor. The rest you know.'

Linda's eyes brimmed with large, wet tears. She rested her head against his shoulder, and the tears soaked into the fabric of his shirt, leaving small dark patches. She sniffed and stifled a sob.

'Hey now, stop that,' he said, lifting her face. 'There's no need for tears.'

'I can't help it,' she sniffled. 'It's all been so bloody awful for you, it breaks my heart.'

'But it's over now, past and gone. Things are better...I'm better.'

She dug in her pocket for a tissue, finding none.

'Here,' he said, handing her his handkerchief.

She used it to wipe her eyes and blow her nose, and held it out for him to take back.

'Keep it,' he said. 'You might need it again. I don't want your tears, but I wouldn't mind if you gave me a hug.'

He put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him and pressed his lips to her forehead, and she passed her arms around him, clutching him firmly. Eager to alleviate the distress he had caused her, he enfolded her in his arms and touched his mouth to hers. Their kisses were deep, warm and loving...and observed.

From the landing, a pair of dark envious eyes watched through the gap in the door as the couple comforted each other.

'Where's Adam got to?' said Tom when Linda later reappeared at his side.

'He's upstairs.'

'What's he doing?'

She glanced over at Barbara, laughing with forced merriment at one of Iain's corny jokes. 'He's having a quiet moment. He'll be down in a bit.'

'Dammit,' complained Tom. 'The food is ready and I really wanted some help, he promised—'

'Just leave him, please. Someone said something that upset him, and he's...well, he's having a moment to himself. I'll help you.'

Tom looked closely at her face. 'Have you been crying?'

'A little bit. Things got a bit emotional for a minute and hugs were needed, but I'm fine now.'

She pasted an unconvincing smile on her face and tapped a fork against her wineglass; the musical *ting ting ting* attracted the attention of all present.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the food is ready. Come and get it!'

Within ten minutes, everyone had food on their plates, and their glasses refilled, and the buzz of conversation resumed.

Barbara excused herself from Iain's company and slithered up to Tom, busily wiping up spilled ketchup

from a tabletop with paper towels. He stiffened when her cold, thin shadow fell across him.

'Tom?' she oozed, surreptitiously.

'Barbara? What can I do for you?'

He fixed on his most artificial smile. He had always detested her, only tolerating her presence for Linda's sake.

'Can I have a quiet word with you?' she said.

'If you must.'

She looked around furtively. 'Look, I may be speaking out of turn here, but you know how fond I am of you and Linda?'

He continued to wipe up the sticky mess. 'Hmmm.'

'So, I feel I have to tell you, I saw something this afternoon that disturbed me and...'

He put the paper towels in a plastic rubbish bag and wiped his hands down his apron. 'And what, Barb?'

She gave him a simpering smile. 'No, forget it. You'll only think I'm interfering.'

'Probably, but go on. It never stopped you before.'

She took a sip from her wineglass. 'No, I shouldn't say anything.'

'You've already started, so you might as well spit it out.'

'Okay, if you insist. You know I would be the last person to want to cause any disharmony between you two, really I would, but there is something I think you should know. When I went upstairs to use the loo a little while ago, I saw Linda and that friend of hers...Adam Strachan...together...in the bedroom.'

'And?' said Tom. He had an idea of what was coming, but he let the woman continue her story nevertheless.

'They were...to-ge-ther,' she said, splitting the word into emphatic syllables.

'What do you mean by together exactly?' Tom caught Linda's eye and waved to her, she waved back. 'Were they playing cards together, talking together, or stripped stark bollock naked and outright fucking their brains out together? You need to be a bit more specific, Barb, just so I get the full picture.'

Barbara's eyes widened and her mouth fell open in dumbstruck horror. Tom beamed an exaggerated smile. 'You can close your mouth, Barb,' he said through the grin, and chucked her chin until her teeth knocked together. 'I already know what they were doing, and guess what...they have my full approval. Can I get you another drink? You look like you could use one.'

Barbara huffed and stalked off across the lawn, as fast as her stilettos would allow her, and Tom, revelling in having brought the offensive busybody to bear, guffawed heartily to himself.

'What's so funny?' said Adam as he watched the woman striding away.

'Hey buddy, where've you been?' Tom exclaimed. 'I could really have used your help here.'

'Sorry...I was—'

'It's okay, mate. Linda told me you needed a minute to yourself. Your timing sucked though.'

'Sorry.'

'It's not a problem. It can happen to the best of us. We managed between us – the horde is fed and watered.' He gave Adam a friendly clap on the shoulder and handed him a freshly uncapped bottle of beer.

'There's plenty left, what do you want?' He opened a section of the barbecue, picked up a plate and dropped three sausages and a pile of fried onions onto it. 'Will that do for starters?'

Adam took the plate. 'Aye, for starters.' He picked up a fork and stabbed it into one of the sausages, devouring nearly half of it with one bite. 'So what's the joke that got you so tickled?'

'Nothing really,' said Tom. 'I've just brought that sour faced bitch, Barbara McLeod, tumbling down off her high horse and head first into the stinking pile of dung she was preparing to throw.'

'What did she do?'

'Tried to stir up trouble, of course. It's her main *raison d'être*; vile cow. She saw you and Linda upstairs and decided to make something of it.'

'Ah.'

'She tried to make out that you two were going at it hammer and tongs.'

'We were doing nothing of the kind,' said Adam indignantly. 'It was just a friendly, innocent cuddle, that's all. I was upset about something, Linda got upset when I told her why I was upset and we just—'

'—comforted each other.'

'Exactly.'

'That's what I thought,' said Tom. 'Do you want mustard on that?'

The afternoon was an overall success, and as evening approached and the sun began to lose its heat, the guests began to drift away home. Both Tom and Linda bade them farewell with handshakes and kisses, except Barbara McLeod who had already left without a word, and without Iain McKay.

The tables were cleared and the dogs wandered the garden with their noses to the ground, seeking out and hoovering up discarded titbits.

'That Barbara is a real bitch,' said Tom, as he passed the last of the washed glasses to Linda to dry. 'What is her problem? Is she not getting enough?'

'What do you mean?'

'She tried to cause a rift between us this afternoon by intimating that you and Adam were having some kind of affair.'

'Whatever gave her that idea?'

'She said she went to the loo and happened to see you two together upstairs.'

Linda stamped her foot. 'God, why do I ever bother with that woman? Ever since Donald divorced her, she's become really bitter and twisted, and a real troublemaker. I really don't think I like her any more. What did you say to her?'

'I told her I knew all about it and that I didn't mind. It blew her right out of the water. She stood there mouth agape, shocked to the corsets. It made my whole afternoon.'

'You didn't!'

He chuckled his delight. 'I did. I don't think we'll be seeing her again in a hurry.' He poured the water out of the bowl and into the sink.

'Does Adam know she saw us?' asked Linda.

'Yep.'

'What did he say?'

Tom dried his hands. 'That it was all completely innocent, and she had hold of the wrong end of the stick.'

'And that's the truth of it,' she said. 'He was upset and it made me cry. It was just a friendly cuddle, that's all.'

'Yep, that's what he said.'

'You sound like you don't believe it.'

He put his hands on her shoulders, his deep brown eyes looking intently into her blue ones. 'You know what, Linda,' he said, in all sincerity, 'I believe every word of it. I've seen you and him together, I've watched you, I've seen how you look at each other, how you are with each other—'

They both looked out of the kitchen window at the man in question, busy in his task of folding up the trestle tables and carrying them into the shed.

'I know how much you love each other. Hell fire Linda, a blind man could see it, and guess what, my darling, I don't feel the slightest bit of jealousy, not the teensiest bit of envy. I've tried, but I just can't do it. In fact, I've come to like it. It makes me deliriously happy to know that you have it in you to love so much. You are a special, special lady, Linda, and I will love you until the end of time. And if you love Adam half as much as I love you, he is a fortunate man indeed. Now give me a kiss and put the kettle on.'

He consulted the clock on the wall, went into the living room and put on the TV.

'Hey, Adam,' he yelled through the interconnecting rooms and out through the open back door. 'Five minutes to kick off.'

Adam waved his acknowledgement and put the last of the chairs into the shed, fastened the padlock on the

door, and made his way back into the house to wash his hands.

'Are you alright now?' Linda said as he dried his hands.

'Fine thanks.'

'Cuppa?'

'Aye, if you wouldn't mind.'

'Cuddle?'

'Oh, aye, I'll never turn one of those down.' She threw her arms around his neck and he clutched her to him, burying his face in her hair and kissing her ear. The roughness of his five o'clock shadow brushed against her cheek, and she ran her fingers up through his hair.

Tom peered through the doorway at the couple holding each other, and rolled his eyes. 'Aw, come on you two, break it up. The match is about to start.'

Chapter 43

'Happy Birthday, darling.'

Tom waited for Linda to wriggle herself into a sitting position in bed, before balancing the breakfast tray on her lap. 'Coffee, toast, eggs and...' He left the room, returning moments later with a bright pink envelope and a small box. '...for you.'

'What's this?' She held the box close to her ear and rattled it.

'Open it and see.'

She ripped off the silver ribbon and paper, and carefully opened the lid to peep inside. She gasped and opened the box wider. There lay a silver cross on a black velvet ribbon, nestled in a black satin liner.

'Oh, Tom, it's beautiful,' she gasped, holding the cross up. 'Thank you.' She reached out for him, and he bent close enough for her to kiss him on the cheek, and on the lips.

'Nothing is too good for my lady,' he said. She opened the card and smiled at the cheesy joke.

He lowered himself onto the bed, taking care not to overbalance the tray. 'What do you want to do today?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'I hadn't really thought about it.'

He picked up a piece of her toast, ripped off a piece and pushed it into his mouth and chewed on it. 'It's a lovely day. Do you want to go into town? We can see a movie...do some shopping?'

She had opened her mouth to give her answer, when a voice called up the stairs. 'Hello! Is anybody home?'

'Up here, Adam,' she called back, and traced his familiar footsteps on the stairs and across the landing. They ended in a timid knock on the bedroom door.

'Come on in, silly. There's no need to knock. I'm decent.'

He peered tentatively around the door, before entering the room. In his arms, he carried a large bouquet of flowers of all types and colours, enclosed in a swathe of bright red cellophane. He laid the bouquet at the foot of the bed and handed her an envelope.

'I'm sorry to intrude. I know it's a Saturday and all, but I just wanted to wish you a Happy Birthday.' He bent close to kiss her, and she, him.

'Oh Adam, the flowers are stunning.'

She opened the card. In total contrast to Tom's, it had a traditional design and, as expected, a long sentimental verse. She took her time to read it all. 'That's beautiful, thank you.' She passed it to Tom to read.

Adam, too, handed her a small gift, wrapped in silver paper and tied off with a silver bow. 'I got you this too. It's not much, but I thought you might like it.'

She stripped off the wrapping to find an identical box to Tom's, and inside, in the scarlet satin lining...another silver cross, this one attached to a red velvet ribbon. She immediately fell into a fit of hysterical laughter, which left her unable to speak for several moments.

'What's so funny?' asked Adam, looking confusedly at Tom, who was smiling broadly and shaking his head.

She wiped the tears of mirth from her face and showed him Tom's almost identical gift. 'Ach, no!' he cried in dismay.

'Whoever said great minds think alike never met you two. Come here...' In turn, she hugged and kissed them both.

'I'll take mine back and exchange it,' said Adam, reaching for the box.

'You'll do no such thing.' She clutched the box to her ample, pregnancy enhanced bosom. 'I'll wear them both. It will be a statement.' She patted the bed beside her. 'Sit down.'

He did as she bid, and she took a sip from her coffee. 'Are you free today, Adam?'

'It's Saturday...your weekends are for Tom, remember.'

'It's my birthday, and I can do anything I like...and I choose...a picnic at the beach with my two favourite men.'

Tom and Adam looked at each other, each silently questioning the other.

'I have no problem with that,' said Tom.

'Sounds like a good idea,' Adam agreed.

'Good, that's that settled then.' She picked up the ripped piece of toast and dipped it into her egg. 'So, while I have my breakfast and a shower and get dressed, you two can go and organise it.' She wafted her hand at them, indicating they should leave. 'Off you go then...shoo.'

The men left the room together and were halfway across the landing when she called to them; 'And don't forget to pack the corkscrew this time, Tom. Pulling a cork out with your teeth isn't very hygienic.'

The day was sunny and warm with a light sea breeze, and the sand above the high tide line, dry and soft. Their picnic on a blanket in the dunes was simple but plentiful. The dogs bounded in and out of the waves as their humans walked on the beach, enjoying ice cream cones.

As they strolled along the promenade, nobody paid the slightest bit of attention to the heavily pregnant woman with one man on either side of her, or that she was holding hands with both.

Linda declared the day to be, 'The best birthday a girl wish for!'

They picked up a Chinese takeaway and beer for their evening meal, and settled down on the sofa to eat, drink and watch TV.

At ten forty-five, the news and weather programme ended, and Adam extracted himself from under Linda's legs; it had been his turn to massage her feet.

'Right, that's me away,' he said.

Linda struggled awkwardly to her feet. 'I'll see you out.' She walked with him through to the back door, and held it open for him. 'Thank you, Adam. I've had a lovely

day, and all the better that you were here to share it with me.'

He kissed her cheek. 'It was my pleasure, and I had a good time too.'

She put her hand to his face. 'I don't want the day to be over.'

'It doesn't have to be,' said Tom from behind them. He put one hand on Adam's shoulder and another on Linda's.

'You don't have to go, mate,' he said to Adam. 'Stay and make Linda's day perfect.'

'No,' Adam argued. 'I can't.'

Tom slapped him on the back and winked. 'Yes, you can.'

'Tom? What? Eh?' Linda frowned, and looked from one man to the other, not understanding their exchange.

'He knows,' Adam said.

Her eyes widened and turned to Tom who nodded confirmation. 'How? When?'

'I've known since day one,' said Tom. 'I know you made a promise not to sleep with Adam, but I also know you lied.'

'Tom...I...'

'And I know why you lied...because you love me, and didn't want to hurt me. You lied also, because you love him too, and knew you wouldn't be able to leave him alone...poor bugger. So, I've decided that, because everybody loves everybody else, I'm going to give you both my blessing.'

He guided them both towards the door to the hallway and the stairs. 'Enjoy the rest of your birthday, my pet.'

She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. 'Thank you, baby,' she whispered, and kissed him deeply. 'Thank you so much.'

She took Adam by the hand and led him upstairs to the spare bedroom and a grinning, satisfied Tom returned to the sofa to watch snooker on TV.

Linda and Adam made love quietly and gently, taking their time and savouring every moment.

In the small hours of the morning, lying together in the dark, she stroked her hand across his chest, fingering the small fine hairs.

'This will be the first time in years you've been in a bed all night with someone else, won't it?'

He let out a small laugh. 'Aye. It's sad isn't it?'

She pulled herself across him to look into his face, just visible in shadow. 'Yes, it is. And it's not fair.'

'I'm used to waking up alone.'

'You shouldn't have to be. And now Tom's given his blessing, you don't have to be.'

'Aye, but saying it is one thing, doing it is quite another. Our homes are a mile apart, remember.'

'Then we need to think about a solution to that.'

'I can't move in here.'

'I'm not suggesting you do.'

'And you can't move in with me—'

'I'm not suggesting that either.'

'Then what are you suggesting?'

'I'll tell you tomorrow.'

'Linda?'

'Go to sleep, I'll tell you tomorrow.'

The next morning at breakfast, she presented the men with a copy of the previous week's local paper, folded open at the property page.

'What do you think?' she said.

'About what?'

She tapped a photograph in the paper. The men took a moment to scrutinise the picture of a pretty double fronted house, half covered in ivy, and with stylish bow windows.

'Very nice,' said Tom through his cereal. 'What about it?'

'It has plenty of space, with enough bedrooms and bathrooms, and a proper dining room. What do you think, Adam?'

'Aye, it's very nice.'

'And it's within walking distance of the wood.'

'What's your point, Linda?' said Tom.

'I think we should buy it.'

Both men turned their astonished faces to her. She looked from one to the other, her raised eyebrows silently awaiting their reaction. Tom spoke first. 'We can't afford it.'

'We can...if we pool our resources,' she said.

'Pool what resources? We don't have any.'

She took a notepad from the kitchen worktop and put it on the table, the top sheet covered in numbers. 'I've done a bit of working out,' she said, 'and I think we can do it, but it all depends on you, Adam.'

'Me?'

'Yes, and if you'll both hear me out, I'll tell you what I was thinking.' She now had the rapt attention of them both. 'Last night, I said to Adam that I didn't think it was fair that he should spend so much time alone. I also think that, with the baby coming and all, we are going to need more space. So this is my proposal...we sell both our houses, pool the cash, and buy a bigger one where we can all live together as one big happy family.'

She looked expectantly at the men, who in turn, looked at each other.

'It has plenty of room for all of us,' she said. 'There's enough space to have private time away from others, should you want it, and there's a proper dining room so we won't all have to squeeze around the kitchen table to eat. Oh, and there are en suites all round; no more waiting for the bathroom. It'll be fantastic. What do you think?'

Her eyes were bright with excitement; both men's incredulous mouths opened and closed like gasping goldfish.

'Say something,' she said.

'I think you're getting a little ahead of yourself,' said Tom. 'You can't just come out with something like that without asking us first. You don't even know what Adam thinks. He might abhor the idea, but you've just gone ahead and made a life changing decision on his behalf. You didn't even ask him, did you?'

The smile fell from her face as her plan crumbled before her eyes. He was right. The overwhelming exhilaration of the proposal had carried her away, and caused her to leap to conclusions that weren't there.

She looked at Adam. 'No, I didn't, did I sweetheart. I'm sorry. It just seemed like the perfect solution and I couldn't let it pass. I was thinking of myself again and not you. I'm so selfish. Please, Adam, tell me what you think.'

'I don't know,' he said, scratching his chin. 'It's a gey big step for sure. Staying in your spare room when I was sick, or kipping here overnight after being on a bender is one thing, sharing a house on a permanent basis, that's a completely different kettle o'fish.'

'You don't like the idea?'

'I didn't say that, but I think we need to talk about it some more. A lot more.'

'And there's one important factor you seem to have overlooked, my pet,' said Tom. 'What if Adam meets someone else. Are you going to want to move her into our house as well? That will give the neighbours something to talk about, won't it, eh?'

Large wet orbs formed in her wide, staring eyes. She sprang to her feet and bolted from the room and up the stairs.

'What did I say?' Tom looked after her in bewilderment.

'Something she really didn't want to hear,' said Adam. 'I'll go and find her.'

He found her in her bedroom, sitting cross legged in the centre of her bed, hugging her pillow tightly. He sat beside her and put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her to him.

'Forget the whole ridiculous idea,' she sniffed. 'Forget I said anything at all. It was stupid to even consider we could all live together under one roof. I'm such an idiot.'

'It wasn't stupid at all. It's a wonderful, considerate idea.'

She dabbed at her eyes with the corner of the pillowcase. 'You're just saying that to shut me up. You don't really think so.'

'Aye, I do. It's a little unorthodox, I admit, and no doubt people will talk, but our whole relationship so far has been a little on the odd side. What's that French term for it...I can't think of it off the top of my *heid*.'

'*Ménage-à-trois*,' she said.

'Aye, that's it - family of three, soon to be four.'

'It won't work, Adam. There isn't the slightest chance.'

'There's always the chance. I know this is the Utopia you wanted, what you talked about before, but it's not something to be rushed into without a lot of deep and meaningful discussion, and I mean plenty. But that's not what's upset you, is it?'

She shook her head.

'It was the prospect of me finding someone else, wasn't it?'

She nodded. He cupped her chin in his hand and turned her head, forcing her to look at him.

'That is not going to happen,' he said. 'I can promise you that with my hand on my heart. I've never been happier in my whole life than I am right now. You're not my wife, but you are having my baby, and I want to be with you and the wean. And if that means selling up my place and sharing a house with you and Tom, then I'm willing to give it a go. You are my one and only love, Linda, you and the bairn.'

She sniffled into the pillow again. He moved her hair off her face to kiss her cheek, and pressed his head against hers.

'Come on downstairs and we'll hold a proper conference. We'll put all our *heids* together and decide on the pros and cons, and see what comes up. If we decide it won't work, what have we lost?'

She nodded her agreement. 'You're always so sensible, Adam. Another reason why I love you.'

'Aye, that and my devilish good looks.' He grinned cheesily, showing them off. 'And you are not selfish,

Linda, which is why I love you. You came up with this plan because you want everyone to be happy, not just yourself. Now dry your eyes and wash your face, and come back downstairs, eh?'

He left her sitting on the bed, and returned to the kitchen, to where Tom was examining the photograph of the house in the paper. Adam sat across the table from him.

'Lindy is always coming up with some potty scheme or other,' said Tom. 'This has to be the most ludicrous since—'

'Since she moved me in here?' said Adam. 'You have to admit that that was a pretty radical thing to do in itself, but it worked out alright in the end. Who is to say this won't?'

'And what if it all falls apart and we decide we can't stand the sight of each other any longer, what happens then?'

'We deal with it, if and when it happens.'

Tom looked at Adam squarely. 'You actually like this idea don't you?'

'Aye, I have to confess, I do.'

'Why? You're single, with money to spend. You have the freedom to come and go as you please with no ties and no responsibilities...it's a grown man's wet dream.'

'Is it yours?'

'No, but—'

'To be brutally honest, Tom, I hate it. I hate living alone. I hate the suffocating, deathly silence and having no-one to talk to except Finn. I hate not having another human presence in my house, especially at night, and I particularly hate not being able to see Linda any time I want, or need to, day or night.'

'And are you, in all honesty, willing to risk everything, especially your hard earned cash, to buy and share a house with her and me, a baby and a mental dog?'

'Aye, I am. If this is the only chance I'll ever have of some semblance of family life, then I'm willing to take the risk. But what about you, Tom. What do you want?'

'I want whatever makes Linda happy. She is my only priority; her and the baby, and...' He folded the paper closed. 'I have to confess something too. I've kind of got used to having you around, Adam. You're not just my wife's best mate, you're more important to her than that. It won't make a whole heap of difference to me whether we all live together or not, but it will make a hell of a difference to her.' He pulled on his bottom lip with his teeth, and let it go with a loud suck. 'Yep. I'm beginning to see there could be advantages to what she's suggesting. You might be right, buddy. It's time to take a chance, nothing ventured, nothing gained.'

The men shook hands across the table.

'Shall we tell her?' said Adam.

Tom nodded. 'I think we should.'

Linda returned to the kitchen to find the two men washing and drying the breakfast things. She stood in the doorway, a sheepish look on her freshly washed face.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I've made a complete fool of myself.'

Tom put down his drying cloth and pulled out a chair for her to sit on. Adam dried his hands and they joined her at the table.

'Are you very cross with me?' she said, looking from one to the other.

Adam wrinkled his nose. 'No. Not at all.'

'Tom?'

'Nah.'

'I am sorry,' she said. 'I jumped right into another crackpot notion without thinking.'

'It doesn't matter because we...' Tom waved his hand between himself and Adam '...have been chatting, and we've decided that even though it needs a lot of thought and planning and probably a joint mortgage we can't afford, on principle it is a sound idea worthy of serious consideration.'

Linda's face brightened. 'Really?'

Both men nodded a, 'Yep' and an, 'Aye' respectively. Linda's smile widened and her eyes filled.

'Now don't start with the waterworks again,' said Tom, passing her the tea towel.

'You have no idea how happy you have just made me,' she wailed.

'I think we might have an inkling,' he said. 'But remember, talking first, nothing has been decided yet, okay?'

She bobbed her head vigorously in agreement. 'Okay.'

Already her mind had begun to work on bringing her plan to fruition.

They talked long and hard about the project, eventually agreeing, over several cups of coffee and a whole packet of ginger nut biscuits, that the idea was sound and worth pursuing. Linda was all for forging ahead as soon as possible, citing that the house in the paper would not be available for long, and they ought to register their interest forthwith.

'Have you forgotten something?' said Tom.

'What?'

'There's the little matter of having the baby first.'

'I can work round that, it won't be a problem.'

Tom put up his hand to calm her ebullience. 'Whoa slow down, Speedy. We're talking about selling two houses, buying another, packing up lock, stock and all our barrels, moving across the village and unpacking again. And then there will be all the painting, decorating and all that other stuff women want doing. It will be incredibly stressful and physical work, and you, my sweet, can hardly get up off the sofa by yourself.'

'I know, but in a few weeks Oscar will be here and it will be easier to move with a baby in a buggy than in my stomach. Speaking of which—'

She got up and left the room to visit the lavatory, leaving the two men sitting shellshocked at the table. They waited until she was out of earshot.

'Well,' said Adam. 'It looks as if we've just planted our feet well and truly on the property ladder, whether we like it or not.'

'Yep,' said Tom, pulling the last of the biscuits from the packet. 'That it does.'
Both men sighed in unison.

Chapter 44

Planning the purchase of the perfect property, and for the subsequent move, began in earnest. In the meantime, normal life continued, with the spare bedroom Adam had temporarily occupied being fitted out as a nursery.

The bed and furniture remained, although rearranged to more effectively house the various items of essential baby equipment and clothing, and a growing collection of soft toys.

When they took delivery of the flat packed crib, the two men made it their mission of the day to put it together. Over copious cups of tea, they grappled with deciphering the deceptively devious instructions.

'I'm a carpenter, for God's sake,' wailed Tom. 'How hard can it be? It looks like it would be easier to whittle down a tree and make one from scratch!'

Assembling the pieces in the correct order turned out to be far more difficult than either of them expected. Making it stay assembled, more difficult still.

Tired out from a day spent in a flurry of dusting and cleaning; an activity Tom insisted was part of her 'nesting' instinct, Linda lay on the sofa. Her head rested against Adam's shoulder, while Tom massaged her feet.

Idly she rubbed her hand across her stomach. The baby was active, its arms and legs pushing and prodding at her insides, its head pressing heavily on her bladder. She had already entertained the men by balancing an empty plastic tumbler on her stomach and waiting for the baby to kick it off, which it did on cue, but now her back hurt, her feet were swollen and she had a headache coming on.

She wriggled herself into a sitting position. 'Help me up,' she said, extending her hands. Each man took one, and tugged her to her feet.

'You okay, love?' said Tom as she frowned, appearing to be concentrating on something.

'Yes,' she said. 'It's nothing specific. Everything on me hurts nowadays. I'm going to go to bed. I'm just so tired.'

She kissed Adam on the cheek. 'I'm sorry sweetheart, do you mind?'

He hugged her and pressed his lips to her hair. 'Not at all. I'll come and see you tomorrow. We'll go for a little walk and get you some fresh air.'

'That will be nice.' She kissed her husband. 'Don't stay up too late, sweetie, you have work tomorrow.'

'I won't. 'Night 'night.'

She left her two men in the sitting room watching the football and made her way up the stairs. She reached halfway when a sensation of tightening ran across her stomach, turning it as hard as wood and causing her to pause for breath.

She had read about and been experiencing painless Braxton Hicks contractions for more than two weeks, always surprised at how intense they could be. This one, however, was particularly strong, and it hurt.

She changed into her pyjamas, brushed her teeth and crawled, exhausted, into bed. She was asleep in moments and did not hear the men cheering at the television as the cup-winning goal was scored.

She stirred and groaned when Tom climbed into bed. 'Sorry, petal. I didn't mean to wake you,' he whispered.

She snuggled up as close to him as her swollen belly would allow. 'It's okay. I was just dozing. Has Adam gone home?'

'Yes.'

'I'm so glad you two are getting along so well now,' she said, sleepily. 'It really makes me very happy. I love you two so much, you know.'

'And we love you,' he said as he kissed her forehead. 'Goodnight, love.'

She didn't answer. She had already gone back to sleep.

Tom grunted as Linda's elbow dug him in the ribs.
'Tom, wake up,' she hissed in his ear.

'Wassit?'

'It's time.'

'Wattstime?'

'It's four o'clock, and it's my time, dopey. Get up.'

'What?'

'The baby's on its way. Get up and get dressed.'

Tom sat bolt upright in bed and threw off the duvet, suddenly very wide awake. 'Jeez, Lind, are you sure?'

She screwed up her eyes and groaned, as another pain gripped her abdomen and shot around her back.

'Pretty sure,' she gasped, when she could speak. 'Will you get dressed please?'

She pulled out her already packed bag from under the bed, and still in her pyjamas, made her way downstairs. Tom followed shortly afterwards, his hair messy and his sweatshirt on back to front.

'Tidy yourself up,' she said, pointing out his disarray. Archie wandered out of the kitchen to see what the fuss was about.

'Go back to bed,' she told him. 'There's nothing to interest you. We'll be back soon.'

Tom helped her on with her coat, and she slipped her comfortable shoes over her bed socks. 'I'll just give Adam a ring so he'll be ready when we get there,' she said.

The telephone call was short and to the point. 'Adam, it's time, get your slippers on.' She hung up and turned to Tom. 'Car keys?'

He dangled them from his fingers. 'Check.'

'Bag?'

He held it up. 'Check.'

'Common sense?'

'Hardy har. Check.'

'Let's go then.'

Within twenty minutes, they had collected a bleary-eyed Adam, fresh from his bed, and as the first glimmers of a new day touched the horizon, they began the long drive to the hospital.

Chapter 45

'We'll just get her settled, and when we have some news for you, we'll come and tell you, okay?'

The nurse ushered Linda through a pair of swing doors and out of sight down a corridor, and the two bewildered men were left standing in the waiting area. Being the only occupants, they had their choice of seat. Adam sat down; Tom chose to stride across the room.

'Here we are again,' he said, examining the contents of the vending machine. 'I hate hospitals.'

Adam picked a tatty magazine from a selection and thumbed through it. 'You and me both. You might as well sit down, Tom. It's going to be a while.'

Tom sat, his hands thrust into his pockets. He dropped his head onto the low back of the chair, staring at the discoloured tiles on the ceiling. He yawned widely, making no attempt to cover his mouth. A period of quiet contemplation followed.

'You know, Adam,' he said. 'Linda must have driven hundreds of miles backwards and forwards to this place over the last year or so. First with me and my gammy leg, and then with you and your...whatsit, chest infection. I haven't totted up how long she's spent here, just waiting and sitting and being there for us...it must be days in total.'

Adam closed the magazine and tossed it back on the pile. 'And she never complained once.'

'Nope.'

'She's a very special lady.'

'One of a kind.'

'That's for sure. You're a gey lucky man to have her, Tom.'

'I know, and so are you. She's devoted to you.'

Adam rested his elbows on his knees and propped his chin on his hands. 'Linda and me...' he began, '...nothing was planned, you know, Tom. It was one of

those things that sort of came out of nowhere, and once it had us in its spell, we just didn't seem able to stop it.'

'I know exactly what you mean,' said Tom. 'It was like that for us too.'

Adam sat back in his chair and folded his arms. 'How did you meet? She never said.'

'Her father hired my firm, I wasn't with Paterson's then, to replace some window frames at their house. She brought me a cup of tea and as I took it from her, our fingers touched, our eyes met and wham...like an electric shock, I was head over heels in love with her, and I didn't even know her name. What about you?'

'Nothing quite so shocking. I took her to see a special tree in the oak wood.' He smiled at the memory of their first kiss. 'She walked around it with her eyes up in the leaves, and I could see she felt the same about that tree as I did. She wasn't looking where she was going, and when she bumped into me and I looked into her eyes, I just knew I had to kiss her.'

'Did you fall for her there and then?'

'I think I did, aye.'

'There's no accounting for the where or when,' Tom said, stoically. 'That's what love does. It sneaks up on you when you're not looking, and *whap*, it belts you so hard on the back the head that when you come to your senses, you're already well and truly hooked.'

'Linda's been a wonderful friend to me,' said Adam. 'She turned up just as I was reaching the lowest ebb of my life. It was like she was sent to help me to cope with it. Without her, I might just have given in and topped myself.'

'Jesus man, don't ever let her hear you say that!'

'She took me in hand and kept on pushing me to leave the Castle and move into the cottage. Being the stubborn sort, I didn't want to listen at first, but I gave in, although the damage was already done. Whether I'd been at the Castle or the cottage, if she hadn't got me the help I needed when I was sick, I could have died. One way or another, she's saved my life.'

'She had to do everything for me for three months when I broke my leg,' recalled Tom. 'And again after the surgery. I made her life hell, but she never gave up and she never gave in and she never...' His voice wavered and he cleared his throat quietly. 'We both have a lot to be grateful for in her.'

'Aye, we do. And I hope she knows how much we appreciate her.'

Tom stood and examined the notice board. Seeing nothing of interest, he sat down again.

'When I found out about you two, it was like a rusty knife to the guts,' he said. 'Linda is my whole world, my whole life. I couldn't stand to be without her, and the thought of sharing her with anyone was almost too much to bear. I wanted her to kick you into touch and not have anything more to do with you. I wanted to keep her all to myself, but she wouldn't let go of you. I was almost beside myself with...I think you might have called it grief. I thought our marriage was dead, finished. But when she moved you in with us, and I saw you two together, how she touched you and looked at you and how she spoke to you, I could see how much she loved you, yet she didn't love me any less. She was right when she said that love didn't diminish when it was shared, just that her heart got bigger. That was...is, the real Linda, and her heart just keeps on growing. We are certainly two truly blessed men.'

'That we are, and I appreciate how hard it was for you to say that, Tom.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'I surprised myself there.' He yawned again and rubbed his eyes. 'How long is it going to take?' he said, his knee pistoning up and down in agitation.

'It's her first,' said Adam. 'It could be hours.'

'How do you know?'

'I read it in a book.'

'I wish someone would tell us what's going on.'

On cue, the swing doors opened and a woman in blue scrubs came through them. Tom sprang to his feet. 'Is there any news yet, nurse?'

'I'm the midwife, Mr Lewis and no, not yet. It's going to be a while. The reason why I am in here, and not in there getting this baby into the world, is because Linda is getting herself in a state with worry about you two. She insisted I come out to make sure you were behaving yourselves. I take it I can report that you are?'

Both men looked at each other and nodded in unison.

'...absolutely.'

'...no problem at all.'

She smiled. 'Good. I'll tell her, and she can stop fretting and relax and have this baby in peace.'

The swing doors closed on her, and Tom retook his seat. 'I need to apologise to you, Adam,' he said.

'What for?'

'I'm sorry I ever threatened to wring your neck and give you a wallop. I've never hit anyone in my life. It was all bluster. I tend to mouth off a bit when the red mist rises.'

'It's alright,' Adam said with quiet laughter. 'Linda said you didn't mean it.'

'Did she now?'

'You were angry, and quite rightly so. Although the dent in the pillow was a bit close for comfort, I wouldn't have blamed you if you had knocked seven bells out of me. I would have deserved it.'

Tom sucked at his teeth. 'I still wouldn't have done it.'

'Why not?'

'First off, you're bigger than me and you have a gun, and second, if I ever did lay a hand on you...Linda would have no qualms about punching *my* lights out in retaliation.'

They both fell into raucous chuckles, and to Adam's surprise, Tom held out his hand to him.

'You're a good bloke, Adam Strachan,' he said. 'And if honest truth be told, I like you - a helluva lot. Whatever I might have thought of you before, you can rest assured that it's all buried in the past. I now know you to be a thoroughly decent chap, and I'm happy to know you.'

Adam accepted his hand and the pair shook. 'You're not half bad yourself, Tom Lewis, for a Sassenach.'

They shook again, and sat back on their respective seats to continue their wait

Chapter 46

'Well?'

Linda stopped pacing the floor, trying, without success, to walk away the pain of the contractions, now coming at regular two-minute intervals, and accosted the midwife as soon as she re-entered the room.

'They're both fine. They're as nervous as kittens, the pair of them, but they're fine. There's no need to worry about anything. Now can we get on with having this baby sometime today?'

As if in response to the relief of her tension, another contraction began. Linda leaned against the cool wall to concentrate on controlling the pain, which gnawed at her with a vengeance. She experienced a thick, popping sensation between her legs and immediately her limbs and feet were engulfed in a deluge of hot liquid. Her waters had broken.

'Well thank goodness for that,' said the midwife, unpacking a sheet from the laundry stack and dropping it onto the floor to soak up the puddle.

She called to her nurse. 'Bring a mop, Janie. We're paddling in here.' She turned back to Linda. 'It won't be long now. Hop on the bed and we'll take a look at how you're far you've dilated.'

Linda climbed onto the bed and lay back against the raised head. Immediately a much more powerful contraction started. She closed her eyes and groaned as the pain built in intensity, turning her abdomen wood hard. She panted her way through the pain, her eyes squeezed so tightly closed, she saw stars.

When the contraction ended, the midwife snapped on a pair of latex gloves and inserted her fingers into her vagina.

'Aha,' she declared knowledgeably. 'You're fully dilated now. I can feel the head already. Whenever you're ready, Linda. It's showtime.'

The next contraction was not long in coming, and with it Linda felt an overwhelming need to push, an urge she felt powerless to resist, and the midwife encouraged her to go with it.

'Ooh, crikey O'Riley, Linda, this one's making up for lost time. He's in a hurry now. The head's crowning already. When the next contraction comes, push down just as hard as you can, okay. Do you want the gas and air?'

Linda shook her head emphatically. 'No, I want to experience it all, I don't care if it huuuurrtrttss!'

'You sure?'

'Yes...oooohhh, here comes another...'

She grabbed at the edge of the bed at the next contraction, her knuckles white against the metal frame, straining as she gave in to the desire to push.

'Come on, Linda, just a little more,' encouraged the midwife. 'The head has crowned...keep going...it's out, he's coming... keep pushing...PUSH!'

Linda growled like a wild animal with the primal instinct to expel her child, and bore down with all her might until the contraction faded, and the pressure decreased and she relaxed.

The midwife smiled encouragingly. 'Well done, Linda. Now, his shoulders should come with the next contraction, so when it comes I want you to really push down into your bottom as hard as you can for as long as you can, okay?'

'Okay.'

Still panting with effort from the previous contraction, she hardly had time to recover before the next one came. It swept over her, around her abdomen, into her back and down her legs, the searing, crushing pain blinding her to everything but itself. She gritted her teeth and squealed through them.

'Push!' commanded the midwife. 'A bit more, come on Linda...the shoulders are out...a bit more...more...keep going...!'

Linda redoubled her effort, and bore down with all her strength, groaning and grunting in exertion. Beads of

sweat broke out on her brow and ran down her flushed face, and she began to quake as her muscles strained. And then, the release; the utter relief as the baby slithered from her in a gush of amniotic fluid and blood.

'That's it!' cried the midwife. 'I've got him. Relax now.'

The contraction ended and the pain faded away as if it had never been. Overcome with exhaustion, Linda dropped back onto the bed, shivering violently. The nurse, Janie, wrapped a blanket over her and brushed her hair from her sweaty forehead. 'Well done, Linda,' she said, soothingly.

'It's a boy, Linda,' the midwife announced, wrapping the baby loosely in a soft towel to keep it warm.

She waited a moment for the umbilical cord to stop pulsing, before taking a pair of forceps from the sterile kit on the steel trolley beside her and clamping it. With scissors, she cut through the cord, and the baby was free – a newly independent being fresh to the world.

She applied a plastic clamp to the cord stump, close to the baby's stomach, wrapped the child in the towel again and handed it to Janie.

The baby immediately protested, and opened its gummy mouth wide to bring forth a lusty, healthy cry as she lowered it into the cold dish of the weigh scales.

'Seven pounds two ounces,' she announced. 'Breathing - loud and normal; colour - pink and healthy. Ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes. He's lovely.'

'Can I hold him?' said Linda, still shivering under her blanket. The midwife propped her up with more pillows and arranged the blanket more tightly about her shoulders.

'We're just doing the routine tests. He'll be with you in just a minute.'

'Does he look okay?'

'He looks absolutely fine, Linda. A strong, healthy boy.'

Linda felt the sharp prick of a hypodermic needle in her thigh. 'What was that?'

'Oxytocin. It will encourage you to expel the afterbirth and stop any bleeding. There's still a bit more work for you to do yet.'

Moments later, she felt another strong contraction, although nowhere near as powerful as the previous ones. The midwife put her hand on her abdomen and began to massage it, at the same time putting gentle tension on the remains of the umbilical cord.

There was one more, short, intense contraction and Linda felt the placenta slip out of her. The midwife wrapped the reddish purple mass of tissue in paper towels and took it away to examine and weigh it.

After about ten minutes, Janie handed Linda her bawling son. 'There you are,' she said. 'All clean and sweet smelling.'

At his mother's touch, the baby stopped crying and opened his eyes, squinting in the bright light. Before he snapped them closed again, she got a good look at their colour - blue grey. She knew that was common enough in newborns, and the true colour would come through later, but would it be her blue, Adam's grey or Tom's brown? In her heart, she knew they would be grey.

She hardly noticed the nurses tidying up around her, so engrossed was she in her newborn.

'Let me take him now,' said the midwife, placing the child in a plastic box crib by the bed. 'It's time to have a look at you.'

After a thorough examination she announced, 'Just a tiny tear there, my dear. A couple of stitches will see that right.'

Janie undertook the job of repairing Linda's perineal damage with painless efficiency. After it was done, she was shown through to a bathroom, where she had a shower and a bidet to warm, clean and soothe herself. While she had been away, the nurses had changed the bloodied sheets on her bed, and a clean, fresh hospital gown had been laid out to replace her stained one. Now comfortable and clean, she got back into the bed.

'We'll take you up to the ward to rest soon,' said Janie. 'You'll stay here until then.'

'Can the guys come in yet?' asked Linda, eager to see Tom and Adam, and show off their new son.

'Whenever you're feeling up to it, Linda. There's no rush.'

She reached for her wash bag on the bedside locker, took out a small mirror and comb, and tidied her hair.

'Do I look respectable?'

'You look fine.' Janie handed her the baby, and Linda brushed its velvet soft head against her cheek and kissed it.

'We're ready,' she said.

Chapter 47

The vending machine dispensed polystyrene cups of tepid liquid to the prospective father and his new best friend. As they sipped at the tasteless brews they discussed sport and politics, they even had time to consider the latest developments in motor vehicle technology.

The faint light of the pre-dawn strengthened into full daybreak as the sun rose and the morning progressed. Bright, warm sunshine streamed through the window onto one man stretched out dozing on the bench seat, and the other sipping at yet another cup of coffee.

The faint squeak of the swing door being pushed open caused Adam to snap awake and sit up. Tom leapt to his feet, spilling some of his drink on his trouser leg.

'Mr Lewis?' Janie, short, round, dark and dressed in blue scrubs looked from one man to the other.

'Yes,' said Tom, brushing at the spilled liquid. 'That's me.'

'You can come in now,' she said.

He looked around for somewhere to dump the cup. Adam took it from him and dropped it into the waste bin.

'Has she had it...the baby...has she?'

Janie beamed a very white toothsome smile at him. 'Yes, Mr Lewis, you're a father. Congratulations. It's a fine healthy boy.'

Adam extended his hand to Tom. 'Well done, Tom. Go and see them.'

During the vigorous, congratulatory shake, Tom suddenly staggered on his feet and the colour drained from his face.

'Oh God...I think I feel a bit...'

His eyes rolled and his knees buckled and both Janie and Adam each grabbed an elbow and guided the semi-conscious man to the nearest seat.

Janie pushed Tom's head down between his knees and she and Adam waited, smiling nervously at each other over his bent back. It took only a few moments for him to begin to regain his senses and sit up slowly.

'Are you feeling okay now, Mr Lewis?'

Tom took two deep cleansing breaths and rubbed his face with his hands. 'Yes, thank you nurse,' he said, nodding. 'I'm sorry about that, it was the shock. I'm okay now.'

Adam helped him to his feet and clapped him on the back. 'Go on then, Daddy, they're waiting for you. Go and meet your wee laddie. I'll wait here.'

Tom looked at him aghast and seized him roughly by the sleeve of his sweater.

'Oh no you won't! You're a part of this family now, and you're coming in too. He can come in, can't he, nurse?'

Janie looked from one to the other, a little bemused. 'Erm...yes, of course.'

She led the two men down a short corridor to a side room and escorted them inside, instructing them to clean their hands with alcohol gel before touching anything, or anyone.

Sitting up in bed, looking flushed but happy, Linda cradled her newborn son. Just visible within the bundle of soft blanket she clutched to her breast, a thick mop of dark hair sat atop a wrinkled, worried looking brow. The awestruck men stood together at the foot of the bed.

'Hello, boys,' she greeted them with a wide smile. 'Come and say hello to Thomas Adam Lewis Junior.'

They edged forwards in a state of nervousness that wouldn't have been out of place if they had been approaching a coiled cobra. They didn't hear the door close as Janie, under instruction to make tea and toast for the ravenous new mother, left the atypical family alone to get to know their newest addition.

'Look, Junior,' Linda said, turning the swaddled infant toward Tom. 'There's your Daddy.' And to Adam. 'And there's your Uncle Adam, see.'

The baby, its eyes still firmly closed, made a gentle gurgle, opened its mouth wide in a toothless yawn, and extended a tiny hand.

Tom could hardly speak with excitement. 'Jeez, Lindy, he's so gorgeous. Can I...can I hold him?'

'Of course you can, but you'll have to get nearer than that.'

He leaned forward and Linda passed the baby into his outstretched arms, carefully ensuring the child's head was well supported in the crook of his elbow.

'He's so tiny,' said Tom, holding the baby as if it were made of fine crystal. He cradled the child to him, an expression of wide-eyed wonder on his face, lifted it to his nose and inhaled the scent of its newness, then placed a gentle kiss on its forehead.

'Welcome to the world, little fella,' he cooed.

Adam took advantage of Tom's distraction to sit on the bed with Linda. He kissed her hot, pink cheek, and held her close to him. 'He's a braw wee laddie, Linda. Just beautiful.'

She looked into his moist, grey eyes. 'Just like his father.'

She looked past his shoulder at Tom, and smiled softly. 'He fainted didn't he?'

Adam laughed. 'Aye, just like you said he would.'

She stroked his cheek, feeling the roughness of stubble coming through. 'Thanks for watching out for him, Adam. I knew I could trust you.'

She looked at Tom again, rocking the baby in his arms, oblivious to everything but the child.

'Aww, look at him. If he smiles any wider, his face is going to split in two.'

Adam brushed back a damp stray strand of hair from her brow. 'How are you feeling?'

She sighed wearily. 'Exhausted, but absolutely fine, euphoric almost. I'm sure that will pass when my hormones calm down. Are you happy with the baby's name? I couldn't not include you.'

He stroked his hand down her cheek. 'I'm ecstatic, really.'

'So go and introduce yourself to your son. Don't let Tom have all the fun.'

Tom passed the child into Adam's outstretched arms. He snuggled his infant son close to his chest and offered his little finger to the baby's hand. Although massive in comparison, the child at once clamped its miniature fingers around it and Adam's smile grew, soon matching Tom's.

Linda, enraptured by the two men fussing and crying over her baby, lay back against the soft white pillows, enveloped in the same glow of contentment that usually followed a bout of particularly good orgasmic sex, and was sure she could indeed feel her heart grow a little bit bigger. She still had a smile on her lips as she slipped into a light doze.

Chapter 48

After being transferred to the general maternity ward, Linda quickly settled in. The men were allowed a brief visit before being ushered away.

'If everything is okay, she can go home tomorrow,' said the staff nurse in charge. 'Until then she needs a good rest while she can...and if you two are going to be of any use to her at all, so do you.'

They were allowed to make their goodbyes before reluctantly leaving, and after getting lost in the maze of hospital corridors, found themselves in the car park.

'That's it then,' said Tom as the two men sat in the Volvo. 'That's really it.'

'Aye, it is,' agreed Adam.

'I'm a dad. It's really happened.'

'Aye, it has.'

'And you're an honorary uncle.'

Adam chuckled. 'Aye, I am.'

'Are you scared?'

'A wee bit. Are you?'

'Wanna know the truth? I'm fucking petrified.'

Tom drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

'What time is it?'

Adam looked at his watch. 'Just gone three.'

Tom puffed out his cheeks and let out a slow, deep breath. 'I think I need a drink,' he said.

Adam nodded, sagely. 'I won't disagree with that.'

'I'm starving as well.'

'Aye, me too come to think of it.'

'Pub?'

'Pub.'

The pair sat in a quiet corner of the lounge bar, on the table before each of them, a plate of sandwiches and a pint of beer.

Tom held his pint glass aloft in a toast. 'To Linda and Thomas Adam Lewis Junior. Health and happiness always.'

'To Linda and Junior,' said Adam. They touched glasses and took long, satisfying swigs.

'I can't help but feel bad for you, Adam,' said Tom.

'Oh, why?'

'Here I am celebrating the birth of my firstborn son, and you're relegated to the sidelines.'

Adam picked up a sandwich and took a bite. 'It's nae bother, don't worry about me,' he said through a mouthful of ham and pickle on brown bread. 'I'm enjoying it as much as if he were my own wean. I have everything I could ever want.'

'We'll make sure you're not left out.'

'I know, and I know you and Linda will be wonderful parents. He'll grow up to be a fine boy and a credit to you both.'

Tom bit into his own sandwich and chewed it slowly, a thoughtful frown furrowing his brow.

'What's the matter?' asked Adam. 'You look worried.'

'I was just thinking. With all the extra work she'll have with Junior, do you think Linda will still find time to look after us too?'

Adam wiped his mouth on his napkin. 'Tom, I can't think of anything she would love more than being a full time mother hen to a helpless baby, and two equally weak and needy beings like us. She can't help herself. She'll be in her element.'

'We will have to help out though, won't we, with nappies and the like?'

'Oh, aye. For sure.'

'I don't right fancy that. By all accounts it can be a bit...unpleasant.'

'It's all part and parcel, Tom. Babies are smelly and noisy, and they need to be kept fed and clean. What goes in one end has to come out the other, and they don't care who takes care of either. And don't forget, we won't be getting much sleep for the next two years, either.'

'Will I have to give up the footie, too?'

'Absolutely!'

Tom's faced creased with disappointment.

'I'm only joshing, Tom. Fitba's allowed, just so long as it's no more than five nights a week.'

'She'll probably be glad to have us out from under her feet sometimes, though, won't she? To spend some quiet time with the baby.'

'Sometimes, I would think so.'

Tom contemplated his beer. 'Do you think there's the likelihood she'll divert so much of her time and love into Junior that she might not have enough left for us?'

'Tom, my man,' said Adam. 'If there is one thing certain in this world, it's the plain and simple fact that Linda does and will love each and every one of us, every minute of every day. None of us is going to go without. And so long as we return it like for like, all will be right with the world.'

He picked up his glass and drained it, smacked his lips with satisfaction, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Same again, mate?' he said, pointing at Tom's glass.

Tom nodded. 'I don't mind if I do - seeing as it's your round.'

About the author:

Jillian Brookes-Ward hails originally from the North of England but now resides in a pretty village on Royal Deeside in Scotland. A former Medical/MedicoLegal secretary, she retired from the 9-5 to pursue her writing career inspired by her locale and the people.

When she is not writing, her interests include walking in the hills and woods around her village with her dog, Archie, amateur photography and the company of friends.

Other books by Jillian:

[Saving Nathaniel](#)
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