

A woman with red hair is shown from the waist up, leaning on a weathered stone railing. She is wearing a vibrant green, off-the-shoulder, long-sleeved dress with a white lace bodice and a large white bow at the waist. Her hands are resting on the railing, wearing long, white lace gloves. The background features gothic architectural elements, including a stone archway and a skull-shaped finial on the railing. The overall atmosphere is dramatic and historical.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUZANNE
ENOCH

A NOVELLA

GREAT
SCOT!



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUZANNE
ENOCH

A NOVELLA

GREAT
SCOT!

GREAT SCOT!

SUZANNE ENOCH



[Begin Reading](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
St. Martin's Publishing Group ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillanusa.com/piracy.**

Chapter One

Jane Bansil threw the heavy blankets over her head and burrowed deeper beneath the covers. Still the sound continued, a sharp, endless wailing that made her hair stand on end and seemed to emanate from everywhere at once. Grabbing a pillow, she pulled that over her head as well. Warmth turned into suffocating heat, but still the sound went on and on and on.

Finally, gasping for air, she flung off the blankets and the pillow and sat up. “For God’s sake, stop!” she yelled, then slapped both hands over her mouth, too late to hold in her very unladylike bellow. *Blasted, stupid, infuriating bagpipes.*

A knock sounded at her door. “Jane?”

Wonderful. Now she’d be caught both complaining and lying abed at seven o’clock in the morning. “Just a moment!” she called, and slid her feet onto the icy stone floor. Stifling a responding yelp, she stepped into her slippers, grabbed her robe, and flung it over her shoulders. “Good morning,” she said, pasting a smile on her face as she pulled open her bedchamber door.

Amelia-Rose Hyacinth MacTaggert, her blond hair loose and a heavy robe around her own slender shoulders, blinked at her from the hallway. “Did I hear you yelling, Cousin? Is something amiss?”

“I’m so sorry,” Jane returned, broadening her smile. “I was just talking to myself. With more volume than I realized, evidently. I didn’t wake you, did I?” Unable to help herself, she lowered her gaze to Amy’s thickening middle.

“Not at all. Niall went out hours ago to help find someone’s cow. Or so he claimed. I actually think he and Aden went fishing.” Jane’s younger cousin grinned. “I hope they went fishing. I don’t need him following me about all morning and flinging pillows beneath me. I would certainly inform him if I were uncomfortable.”

“Then I’m also happy you have the morning to yourself.” Jane took a half step back, not enough to be unfriendly, but she hoped enough to inform her cousin that continuing the conversation wasn’t necessary.

Amy, though, followed her retreat with a step forward. “Actually, Miranda and Eloise and Persie and I are going down to the village for breakfast at The Thistle. Evidently, it’s a tradition for the MacTaggart women to do so before Christmas, and we’re nearly out of time. Will you join us?”

Abruptly the wailing stopped. For a bare second Jane closed her eyes, pulling the silence around her like another cozy blanket. “I’m not a MacTaggart.”

“Not in name, but you live with a great many of us. Aside from that, you’re *my* family, which by extension does make you a MacTaggart. And you’re definitely a woman.”

She was that, and probably the only virgin left in the house, but she wasn’t so certain about the rest of it. The MacTaggerts, male and female and born to the family or married into it, were bold and boisterous and rather wild. None of those words came anywhere near to describing her. “Please don’t feel like I need to be entertained or something,” she said. “I have duties, you know.”

Reaching out to take one of Jane’s hands, Amy nudged her backward deeper into the bedchamber and shut the door behind them. “I need to speak plainly with you, Jane,” she whispered.

The morning’s annoyance at the bagpipes twisted into genuine alarm. “Are you well, Amy? If you need to return to London, I will of course accompany you. Is—”

“Jane,” her cousin interrupted, a smile again lighting her face, “hush.”

Clamping her mouth shut, Jane kept hold of Amy’s hand. The past few months swirled about them still, chaotic and full of adventure, romance, a trio of Highlander brothers, and a quartet of weddings—and now Amy’s pregnancy and arriving but five days before Christmas at a place none of the ladies had ever been before but now would be calling home for at least part of the year.

“I can never thank you enough for what you did for me—for Niall and me, Jane,” Amy said, squeezing her hand. “It cost you your home and your employment. I know you’ve assumed the position of Lady Aldriss’s companion, but ... is that what you truly want?”

Jane winced a little. Another discussion about possibilities, when she’d exhausted them all ages ago. “I *am* a lady’s companion, Amy. What should I be, a baker’s apprentice?”

“Yes, but, I mean, I know my mother managed to make you feel grateful that she was willing to offer you a position as my companion. That is not all you have to be, though. Your family may not have been as wealthy as mine, but your birth is certainly equal to mine. What I mean to say is, if you wish to do something else, to find a different life, I will see to it that you—”

“I’m quite fine, Amy,” Jane broke in, her heart easing as she realized this was only about her cousin’s guilt at having the happier life. “I am three-and-thirty, far too old to be dancing through London looking for a husband, of all things.” She winced again at that thought. “And, as you know, I have a preference for quiet and peace.”

“Yes, but—”

“Being Lady Aldriss’s companion gives me all the exposure I want to life’s fineries. And she’s kind, if a bit intimidating, the first being very welcome, and the second being something to which I am quite accustomed.” Indeed, just discussing her former employer and aunt, Victoria Baxter, left her with a twitch and a hunch to her shoulders. Good heavens, she was

pleased to be away from that and from being reminded constantly how grateful she should be to have a roof over her head and someone willing to put up with her timid ways enough to keep her employed.

Now she'd fallen into a position that, while Lady Aldriss expected competence and a degree of independent thinking, at least made her feel valued, if not entirely necessary. After all, the countess had a daughter, and this summer had added three new daughters-in-law to her family. A companion seemed superfluous, even to Jane. She'd been ignoring that fact for the past few months, however, and intended to continue to do so until she managed to convince herself that this was where she was meant to be.

"I just want you to be happy," Amy pressed. "You are a good person, you know."

"Thank you for concerning yourself about me, when you have so many other things on your mind."

Amy put her free hand over her stomach. "I can hardly believe how differently this year is ending from the way it began. I was a burden, never proper enough, never saying the right thing, and never going to be able to make a beneficial marriage. Now I'm married to a Highlander, of all people, I'm deliriously happy, and I'm going to be a mother in three months."

"And you're in Scotland. Don't forget that," Jane added as the wailing bagpipe began again.

Laughing, Amy hugged her. "I know! We'll have snow for Christmas. Can you imagine?"

"I can imagine. It nearly feels like it could snow here inside the house."

Amy only chuckled again, but then she had a very handsome, very charming husband to keep her warm at night. At that thought, Jane's cheeks warmed. It wasn't jealousy, she reminded herself. She was as happy that Amy had escaped Mrs. Baxter's household as she was that *she* had done so. It

was only a realization that she was not one of the lucky people meant to have a happily-ever-after life.

“Say you’ll join us for breakfast,” Amy pressed, releasing her again.

“I shall try,” Jane hedged. “Lady Aldriss may need me this morning.”

She understood Amy’s sideways look: Not only had Lady Aldriss seen her four children married within twelve weeks, she’d also found a way to bring her estranged husband down from the Highlands after seventeen years of separation, and she’d managed to see all of them together with new husbands and wives for Christmas. In Scotland.

The woman didn’t *need* help. She’d offered a position out of kindness and charity, and Jane had accepted it out of necessity. It was supposed to be temporary, until something long-term where she could be more useful came along, but thus far she hadn’t even had a nibble.

“You might *ask* her if she requires your presence; she’s down in the morning room.”

Blast it. Lady Aldriss had already risen? “Oh dear,” Jane said, scowling. “Excuse me, Cousin. I must dress.”

“Of course. But ask her about joining us. We leave in twenty minutes.”

Once her cousin had left the room, Jane dove into her wardrobe for her warmest gown, a plain blue dress with long sleeves and a high neck. It rather resembled all of her other gowns, actually, but that had been the case for her entire adult life. A half-dozen practical gowns, two night rails, three bonnets, four shifts, two pairs of shoes, a quantity of hairpins, and some personal toiletry items both kept seeing to herself to a matter of moments and made it simple for her to prepare for a day or a week or a lifetime lived at someone else’s beck and call.

Blowing out her breath at her reflection in her dressing mirror, Jane decided her present melancholy was entirely the fault of the weather. Winter in the environs of London could

be chilly, and on occasion a storm brought a dusting of snow, but here ... Well, just beyond the main buildings of Aldriss Park the snowbanks rose above her head, and down the slope where Loch an Daimh hugged the lower reaches of hills and mountains for five miles around all the edges of the water were now ice.

Even her black, straight hair felt cold as she brushed it out. She would rather have left it down to cover and protect her ears and the back of her neck, but she'd worn the same tight bun for as long as she could remember. There were times she half expected her hair to knot itself into a bun all on its own, she'd done it so many times.

That, though, was just silliness. At least now, though, she could relax enough to indulge in thinking silly things from time to time. Previously it had taken all of her wits just to keep from overly annoying her aunt. And that was why, despite the snow and the cold and the very large number of MacTaggerts running about, she was rather happy to be in Scotland. Even with the bagpipes wheezing to life first thing in the morning.

On her way to the morning room she darted inside the large breakfast room for half a slice of toast, which she choked down as she reached the doorway at the far end of the hall. Rapping her knuckles against the frame of the half-closed door, she ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth to loosen the last of the sticky crumbs from her teeth.

“Come in.”

The low, rumbling voice clearly didn't belong to any female, much less to Lady Aldriss. Even so, Jane took a breath and pushed the door open wide. “Good morning, my lord,” she said, dipping in a proper curtsy.

Lady Aldriss's oldest son, Viscount Glendarril, turned away from the front window. “Jane. Ye after my mother?”

“Yes. I was told she was in here.”

“She was. When I informed her that the house didnae have any gold thread for mending, she started spinning in a circle and then vanished in a puff of angry smoke.”

“I—”

“I did no such thing,” Countess Aldriss commented, stepping up behind Jane. “I went to ask Pogan to fetch me what sewing materials remain here.”

“I should have done that, my lady,” Jane said, turning to curtsy again. “I overslept; I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Nonsense,” Francesca Oswald-MacTaggart countered, moving past her to take the chair nearest the roaring fire. “I thought you were going down to The Thistle for breakfast with my daughters.”

“I ... You don’t mind?”

“Well, I could send you up and down the stairs after needle and thread all morning, but since the house hasn’t had a woman tending it for seventeen years, I’m afraid what you might find.” The countess sighed. “Go have breakfast.”

“But if it’s tradition for the MacTaggart ladies, shouldn’t you be attending?” Jane pursued.

“Aye, she should be,” the viscount broke in, frowning. “That’s what I’ve been telling her for twenty minutes.”

“I am well aware just how unpopular I am here, Coll,” Lady Aldriss returned. “I am not about to go stomping about the village on my first day back in Scotland. They’ll throw tomatoes at me.”

“Nae, they willnae. It would be potatoes. But I’d see to it they didnae throw anything at ye.”

“Give them all a bit of time to become accustomed to the idea that I may be here more often, first,” his mother cautioned. “I’m in no hurry. Nor am I entirely certain your father and I are ready to reconcile.”

“Och. Ye’re back here at Aldriss Park. That’s someaught I’d nae have expected before I set eyes on ye walking up the front steps yesterday afternoon. Go find yer thread, then. I’ve a meeting with an architect.” He tilted his head, a slight grin touching his handsome face. “Four of us lads could live here

in peace, all being men and reasonable. Now we're ten, with bairns on the way. Temperance and I need our own damned house."

They all got on fabulously as far as Jane could tell, but she could see why the eldest, especially, would want to be beneath his own roof. Aldriss Park, she'd realized after only one day here, could be very noisy, indeed. And that was quite the accomplishment, after the chaos of Oswell House in London.

"Jane, dear?"

She blinked, facing the countess. "Yes, my lady?"

"Go. If you run across any gold thread suitable for embroidery, please return with it. Otherwise, I suggest you make the most of social gatherings here. There aren't many of them."

Now it was a gathering? Oh dear. A breakfast had been more than enough. "Is that an order, then?" she asked briskly, drilling her stiff fingers together and attempting not to look like she was holding her breath.

Swift disappointment crossed the countess's face and just as quickly vanished. "No, it isn't. I only want you to have friends and a social life, my dear."

"I have employment and my books. Both make me happy. And if I may be forthright, my lady, your daughter and daughters-in-law, including my cousin, are very kind and ... confident, and they don't seem to be afraid of anything. I am afraid of a great deal, most of all the looks they will pretend not to exchange when they want to go next to the milliner's or the jeweler's or the bakery and I try to beg off."

Lady Aldriss settled her hands into her lap. Lord Glendarril muttered something under his breath and fled the room. "Considering that is the most words I've heard you speak together in six months," the countess commented, "it would be foolish of me to presume that you don't mean them. Do as you will. I won't require you until after luncheon, to assist me with boxing gifts for Christmas."

Oh, thank goodness. “Yes, my lady,” Jane said, dipping again.

“Wife,” came from the hallway door, and the broad-shouldered Earl Aldriss himself strolled into the morning room. “I require a word with ye.”

“Husband,” the countess returned, and subtly angled her head at Jane. “You’ve found me in a mood to listen.”

Stifling a yelp, Jane took the hint and left the room. She’d heard a few brief arguments while the earl had been visiting Oswell House in London, but from what she’d gleaned from overhearing bits of conversation among the MacTaggart men, the fights between Lord and Lady Aldriss had once been legendary. She had no wish to be in the middle of one of those.

With an unexpected few hours to herself, Jane went about exploring the rooms of sprawling Aldriss Park. Because she didn’t wish to hear the MacTaggart ladies’ response to learning that the countess’s paid companion wouldn’t be joining them for their outing, either, she stayed away from the entire front of the house, in fact, but all those contrary thoughts left her head as she discovered the library.

Considering the masculine feel of Aldriss Park, the well-stocked library surprised her. Yes, she knew all three of the MacTaggart brothers enjoyed reading, but she’d also spent the last six months at Oswell House in London in the company of a stuffed deer named Rory that had previously been proudly displayed in this very room. The two full suits of armor standing ready for battle against one wall had sufficient space between them that a full-grown red deer with very large antlers would have fit there quite nicely. She walked over to take a closer look at the well-polished metal.

“The one on the right there belonged to my great-great-granddad,” an unfamiliar male brogue came from the doorway behind her. “Ye can see the dent in the helmet where a mad Sassenach tried to put a club across his skull.”

There was indeed a marked indentation on one side of the ornate helmet. “He survived, though?”

“Oh, aye. I cannae say the same for the Sassenach.” A pause, and booted footsteps approached behind her. “Ye’re English. Are ye one of the brides, then?”

“No. I’m Lady Aldriss’s companion.” She wanted to turn around and see to whom she was speaking, but then she would stammer and her face would flush and she’d be ... herself again. Squaring her shoulders, Jane took a step forward and ran her fingers along the dent. “You said ‘your’ great-great-grandfather. You aren’t one of the brothers, though.”

“Nae. I’m a cousin. Angus—the earl—is my uncle, brother to my mother, Ava. I’m Brennan Andrews.”

“Jane. Jane Bansil.”

“Pleased to make yer acquaintance, Jane Bansil. Though I do have to wonder why ye willnae turn around and look at me. Unless ye’ve heard, of course.”

Oh dear. “Heard what?”

“About the accident. Some years ago, I fell from a horse onto a wooden fence. Coll says it improved my appearance, but then it was his horse that threw me—the only benefit of that being him feeling obligated to hire me when he decided he had need of an architect.”

The architect Lord Glendarril said he would be meeting with this morning. Well, now she really wanted to look. Reminding herself not to stare, not to make a face or appear shocked in any way, Jane squared her shoulders and turned around.

Considering what she knew of the MacTaggerts, she’d half expected to see a walking, breathing god standing before her, the tiniest of scars brushing one otherwise perfect cheek. The reality, however, was somewhat different.

Brennan Andrews *was* a very fine-looking man. There could be no argument about that. Elegantly curved brows, black hair swept back from his face but nearly long enough to brush his broad shoulders, a refined nose and strong chin—and one fine green eye with a twinkle in its depths. The left eye, or the place where it should have been, was covered by a black

leather patch, which did little to conceal the end of a scar trailing crazily down along his left cheekbone almost to his mouth.

“Y ... Oh,” she stammered, then flushed furiously when she realized how completely idiotic she sounded. “I thought you were either jesting or that you’d have a wooden arm or something.”

He glanced down at his arms. “Nae wooden arm. It was quite the fence, though. I dunnae frighten ye, do I, Miss Bansil?”

Jane cleared her throat. “No,” she said aloud. “You did make me wonder to whom the other suit of armor belonged.”

His right eyebrow lifted just a touch, and then he turned his gaze beyond her to the iron suits. “Ah, that one. Domnhall MacTaggart himself wore it on the day he told King Henry—the eighth one—that a man should be allowed to wed as many women as it took to get him a son. He was made Earl Aldriss that very day, and in that armor.”

“Goodness,” she said, but then realized she’d forgotten to turn around and look at it. Instead, she stood there gazing—or, rather, staring—at Brennan Andrews in his eye patch, thick gray coat, red and white and green kilt, and heavy boots. “So, you’re an architect.”

“Aye.” He visibly shook himself. “As a matter of fact, I’m in the middle of a meeting with Coll. I came in here for a map of the estate.”

“Oh. Of course. Excuse me.” Bobbing awkwardly, she moved out of the way to browse a shelf that might have held books about dirt for all the attention she paid.

Inclining his head in return, he walked to a stand in one corner where a dozen rolled maps stood. “Nae,” he muttered, setting one aside and opening the next one. “Nae.”

Jane grimaced. “Do you ... I mean, might I assist you?”

“Aye.” Removing a map from the stack, he held one end out to her. “I’m after one that has the entire Aldriss property, with all the current buildings and topography notations.”

“Won’t Lord Glendarril be residing *here* eventually?” she asked, unrolling the heavy paper to see a plan for the upper floor of Aldriss Park.

“Aye. I dunnae ken if ye’ve noticed, though, but there are quite a few MacTaggerts. Once they have their bairns there’ll be even more. So this new house Coll has in mind will be used, nae matter who ends up with it.”

Plucking another roll from the stack, Jane opened it up. “Is this what you wanted?” she asked after a moment’s perusal.

He moved closer, bending his head beside hers. As he did so, Jane inhaled. Snow, pine trees, and, very faintly, old leather came to her, together with an image of a warm fire and a room full of old, carefully bound books.

“Aye, that’s the one,” he said, favoring her with a slight, crooked grin that made her breath catch just for a second, before she remembered that she was, after all, Jane Bansil, poor relation to the blue-blooded Baxter family and paid companion to Lady Aldriss.

Brennan took the rolled paper from her, their fingers brushing as he did so. “Good,” she squeaked out. “I’m glad I could help.”

“If ye’ll excuse me, then, I need to talk with Coll before he charges out and begins tossing logs into a pile to make himself a house.”

“Of course.”

Halfway to the door he turned to face her, though he continued his retreat. “The books over there on the top shelf,” he said, aiming the map at the leftmost side of the library, “are true Scottish histories. They’re a bit bloody, but there isnae much about Scotland that isnae bloody. There’s one on architecture there ye might find to yer liking. Perhaps. *Scottish Castles and Highlands History: A Tangled Web.*”

With that he left the room, leaving the door standing open behind him. Jane watched the empty doorway for a moment, then sank into a chair. *Good heavens.* If she hadn’t been three-and-thirty and *well* past looking to make any sort of match, if

she still owned a young lady's fantasies of fairy tales, that magnificent one-eyed specimen of manhood smiling at her might very well have had her swooning.

At least she hadn't come across as an utterly deranged hobgoblin—or so she hoped, anyway. Lady Aldriss might claim to want her companion to make some friends of her own, but Jane more than suspected that had more to do with the countess wanting some time to herself than with a plan to fill Jane's social calendar. The countess was a formidable and much-respected member of London Society, after all.

Francesca MacTaggart had accepted a quiet, awkward, and unnecessary spinster into her employment, but an embarrassing, drooling flirt with no sense of her own ... limitations was another beast entirely. Not even Lady Aldriss's largess would accommodate that.

Well, Jane *did* know her own limitations. And so she accepted a moment's pleasant conversation with a very well-favored man for precisely what it was—a pleasant moment. Standing, she walked over to peruse the shelf at the far left of the library. And then she selected the book about Scottish historical architecture, simply because she enjoyed reading about architecture. No other reason.

Chapter Two

“Aye, ye’d have a good view from the mountaintop,” Brennan Andrews said, pulling the map around to take a better look at the indentation where Coll had shoved his thumb. “Ye’d also risk being blown off said mountain every winter by the storms.”

“Nae if ye bury the foundation deep enough.”

“Ye’d nae be able to go outside without getting swept into the air, ye lummo. Well, ye might be able to. Nae yer wife or any bairns.” Narrowing his good eye, Brennan slid his own finger a half mile to the south and west, where the west edge of Loch an Daimh dug long fingers into the western foothills. “This’d suit ye better.”

The viscount leaned closer. “How far is that from Aldriss?”

“Nae more than half a mile. Ye could take a boat across the loch in ten minutes. Riding, though, I’d say a mile.”

“I dunnae want my brothers taking a spyglass and looking in my windows, Brennan.”

“They couldnae. See the curve of the bank here? Ye’ve a hill and a great stand of trees hiding Aldriss from whatever ye put there.” He cocked his head. “Aside from that, it’s the finest spot on the loch. And ye ken that Aden and Niall will see what ye’re about and want their own homes here, as well.”

“Dunnae try yer clever ways on me, ye bastard,” Coll rumbled. “I’ve an idea that Aden and Miranda mean to live here with Da, and Niall’s had his eye on the old Creag

Falaichte house since he was a bairn. So I'm yer only chance to build a proper manor house."

For the moment ignoring the fact that Creag Falaichte was a ruin that would definitely require at least new walls and a roof, Brennan grinned. "Aden and his bride living with just yer da, then? Was seeing Lady Aldriss walking down the stairs this morning my imagination?"

"That, I've nae comment about," Coll returned. "She came up here for the holiday. If she stays longer, well, then Da's going to have to learn to be more charming."

And less stubborn, Brennan thought, though he didn't say that aloud. "Seems to me that ye and yer brothers learned a few of those lessons, yerself. Ye are all married, after all. Ye should have heard the lasses weeping when the news came north."

"Oh, shut it." Coll sank into one of the chairs pushed up to the table. "Get out yer paper and pen, and I'll tell ye what I want for my house. Then ye sit with Temperance and she'll tell ye what she wants, and ye'll mark out all my nonsense that doesnae fit with hers."

Brennan gazed at his cousin for a moment. "I was nearly four when ye were born, Coll," he said finally. "Ye stood for me at my wedding. And until this moment, I've nae thought ye'd find a lass who could stand up to ye. But ye do love her, dunnae?"

The fond, introspective look on Coll's face nearly made him jealous. "Aye. She's the one, Brennan. And ye've the right of it. She stands up to me. Temperance is a damned independent, brilliant lass, and I'm looking forward to spending my life in her company."

"Good."

Almost immediately the viscount's expression sobered again. "I shouldnae be saying such things to ye, though. Ye had that, and what happened..."

Taking a breath, Brennan rolled up the map again and set it aside. "What happened, happened. I dunnae begrudge ye a

moment of yer happiness, *Co-ogha*. Eithne wouldnae, either.”

The name tasted strange on his lips. Foreign, almost. It wasn't that he didn't think about Eithne Andrews any longer—he did so almost daily. It was just that he rarely spoke about her to anyone any longer. It had been seven years since the fever had claimed her, and God knew no one else in his extended family wanted to see him moping about or bemoaning his fate. He'd already lost an eye; he didn't reckon there was anyone more pitiful than a one-eyed weeper.

Aside from that, Coll was just beginning what would, he hoped, be the best part of his life. Simply because he had an older cousin who'd seen his best bits taken from him didn't mean the viscount wanted to be endlessly reminded of it. No one did, including Brennan.

“Even so,” Coll said aloud, his expression still dour.

“Even so, how many bairns do ye mean to have?” Brennan countered. “I reckon I cannae fit a house with more than forty rooms on the shore or it'll slide straight into the water.”

“*Trioblaideach*,” his cousin muttered, his grimace growing more amused again.

Brennan put a hand to his chest. “Me? I'm nae a troublemaker. I solve other people's problems. Starting with yers. So tell me what ye had in mind for a house.”

As he made notes about what Coll wanted, Brennan's thoughts drifted back to the library. He hadn't expected to find anyone there at this hour of the morning, but there she'd been—a tall, black-haired lass with porcelain skin and her hair pulled back so tight it was a wonder she could shut her eyes enough to blink. But she'd had kind brown eyes, he recalled. Kind and patient, and a wee bit sad.

“Who's Jane Bansil?” he asked abruptly, interrupting something about a fireplace grand enough for a man to stand upright inside.

“What?”

“Miss Bansil. I ran across her in the library. She said she's the countess's companion.”

“Oh, Jane. Aye. She’s Amy’s cousin. Tried to keep the lass out of trouble, and then found herself sacked by her own aunt when she decided to help Amy and Niall elope.”

“No wonder she’s skittish, then.”

Coll nodded. “Timid as a rabbit, that one. Did ye write down the grand fireplace?”

“Aye. I even put a line under it so I’d nae forget.” He drew a second line, just to be certain. If she’d been sacked by her aunt, he could understand why she’d be nervous; if her own family treated her that poorly, she wouldn’t be expecting much from anyone else.

“Dunnae pretend to humor me,” his cousin stated. “It’s cold here in the winter, and I’ve a wife who’s nae accustomed to it. She did grow up in Cumberland, but that’s still nae comparison to the Highlands in January.”

Brennan hadn’t met Temperance MacTaggart yet, but he had read about her, both in the letter from his uncle and in the newspapers when they finally made their way this far from London. “Dunnae punch me, but she’s an actress, aye? Do ye truly mean to let her continue onstage? She’s Lady Glendarril now, after all.”

“She’ll do as pleases her, and that will please me.” Coll rolled the map back and forth between his big hands. “I honestly thought she was nae but an actress, and I fell for her anyway. Persephone Jones, the most famous actress in London. And then after I decide I’m ready to take on all the MacTaggerts and all of clan Ross to keep her, she tells me she’s a runaway heiress named Temperance Hartwood. She’d been on her own for eight years, and made a damned fine life for herself, Brennan. She can have a hundred fireplaces if she wants ’em, and she can act in every play ever written.”

“Do ye want a room in yer hundred-fireplace house for performing, then? Someaught with a raised stage so she can rehearse?”

Coll leaned forward, jabbing his finger at Brennan’s notes. “Aye. Ye write that down. And underline it, too.”

He did so and then went on with his questions and suggestions for the next hour as Coll sorted through what he wanted. Lady Glendarril and the other lasses were still down at the village, so after he'd finished with his cousin he took the map, ruler, and some fresh sheets of paper and returned to the library to sketch.

The lass wasn't there, but he put his disappointment to not having anyone about to commiserate with him at the number of bricks that would be needed for all the damned chimneys Coll wanted. Outside, visible through the trio of windows the library boasted, a light snow fell in slow, swirling silence, just enough to remind him that Christmas was but four days away, and Hogmanay only a week after that.

A shadow crossed the empty doorway, then vanished again. Brennan noted it, but continued working, humming "Auld Lang Syne" under his breath as he drew. He'd told Coll where he'd be and assumed that when the lasses returned he would be meeting with Lady Glendarril. Until then, he wanted to at least figure out a rough layout of what he assumed would be called Glendarril House—as the original Glendarril had burned well before the end of the Jacobites at Culloden and had never been much more than a wee hunting cottage to begin with.

Movement caught his attention again. He looked up, canting his head a little to the left to give himself a better view of the doorway. This time he caught sight of a blue skirt before it passed out of sight again.

The lass. Jane Bansil. She'd been wearing blue, a stiff, high-necked gown that looked as if it might break if she let out her breath. Still humming, he pushed to his feet and quietly crossed the room. Leaning against the wall beside the doorway, he waited for the swish of skirts, then stepped out into the hallway.

"Good afternoon, Miss Bansil," he said, inclining his head and pretending not to notice her squeak of surprise.

"Mr. Andrews. I ... You're still here. I didn't know."

That was obviously a lie, but he only nodded. "Aye."

“Do ... Do you require any more assistance? I’m free until two o’clock, it seems.”

Women here in the Highlands as a rule didn’t attempt to force themselves into conversation with him. They knew him as a widower, and they’d known Eithne as a friend, and not a one of them wanted to be accused of attempting to take her place or, worse, leading him astray. It was ridiculous, of course, but Pethiloch was a small village, and everyone knew everyone else’s bloody business the moment it happened.

Perhaps she wasn’t flirting, and perhaps her offer had been precisely what she claimed, but he didn’t know for certain. That in itself was invigorating. “I’d welcome a female opinion,” he said, moving sideways to give her access to the doorway. “I’m trying to design a house for Coll—Glendarril—and all he’s told me is that he wants a great many fireplaces for keeping his lass warm in winter.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but he and the MacTaggart brothers had grown up together and in a very heavily masculine setting. A few insights into what a proper lass wanted, an English lass at that, *would* be helpful.

“Oh,” she said, touching the back of the chair opposite him as if trying to decide whether she’d been invited to sit with him or not. “My experience with great houses is limited to ballrooms and foyers for the most part, I’m afraid.”

He gestured at the chair as she continued to hesitate. “A house needs certain things, always. A kitchen, rooms for sleeping, a place to put things. For a great house, ye add a morning room, a dining room, an office, a library, mayhap a music room, a drawing room if they mean to entertain or have a large family, a room for playing cards or billiards. A nursery, places for servants to sleep and eat, and outside, a stable and a garden. It’s the proportions that differ, mostly.”

“The MacTaggerts practically live in each other’s pockets,” she said, finally sitting, “so a very, very large dining room and drawing room, for certain.”

“Aye.” He made a note beneath the note he’d already made to himself about that very thing. “What do ye know of Lady

Glendarril? I was thinking she might want a sunroom for flowers and sunlight in the winter, but I'm nae certain."

"She's very gregarious. I don't know how much solitude she would require. But the house she was renting did burn down six months ago. She moved into Oswell House after that, and of course stayed after the wedding."

"I hadnae heard that." He sent her a sideways glance. "Ye've been surrounded by chaos, I reckon."

Her mouth curved in a brief, attractive smile. "That I have. The MacTaggerts do seem to upend things a great deal." Her grin slammed shut again. "No offense meant, of course."

"Nae a bit taken. I'm half MacTaggert, but I've eyes—an eye—to see with. 'Upending' is a gentle way of putting it."

Her shoulders lowered a little. Brennan felt a wee bit like he was trying to coax a wild foal to take grain from his hand. That smile, though ... He wouldn't mind seeing it again. Teasing it out of her might take some effort, but it would be worth it.

"She could likely use a place where she can try on costumes and see the effect from different angles," Miss Bansil put in abruptly. "She's an actress. A very fine one."

"So I've heard. Mayhap a sitting room with an arc of mirrors on one side? Or a room with a stage and a space for seats, and the mirrors in an alcove?"

She sat forward. "Oh, that would be perfect. With a place for canvas scenes to be displayed behind the stage."

Brennan made another note, not atop one he'd already made. "Anything else?"

"Curtains? In front of the stage, I mean. And heavy ones for the windows. A miniature theater."

"Aye. I like that." Setting aside his notes, he took a larger paper and did a quick sketch of what she'd described, then turned it to show her. "Someaught like that?"

"That is exactly what I'd imagined. My goodness. You—You're very talented, Mr. Andrews."

“Och. Brennan, if ye please. I’m nae as high-and-mighty as the MacTaggerts, Miss Bansil.”

Her pale cheeks flushed. “Jane, then. It’s only fair.”

Realizing he’d been gazing at her rather intently, Brennan cleared his throat and shifted another piece of paper. “Well, Jane, I dunnae mean to keep ye from yer duties, but if ye’ve a few minutes, I’d like yer help in figuring out the rest of the house.”

“I doubt you require my assistance,” she returned, “but if you’d like the company, I have nowhere to be until this afternoon.”

He met her pretty brown-eyed gaze again. “I *would* like the company. Generally sitting by myself while I scribble is peaceful, but more and more I find it a wee bit ... lonely.”

She visibly swallowed. “You aren’t married, then?”

“Nae. I was, once. My wife, Eithne, died of a fever seven years ago now.”

“My condolences, Mr. An—Brennan. She kept you company, then?”

“Aye. She always recommended an overabundance of sitting rooms, but that did remind me to put at least one or two into the plans.” He started to clear his throat, realized that he’d just done that and would likely have her thinking he had a fever, himself, and then choked as he tried to stop himself.

Immediately she fled the room. Before he could do more than frown and begin cursing at himself while he pounded his own chest and hacked, Jane returned with a glass of water. “Take a drink,” she instructed. “Small sips until the spasms cease.”

He did as she ordered. “Ye know someaught about choking on yer own spit, then?” he managed.

“Oh, definitely. I almost constantly have to stop myself from saying something idiotic.”

A laugh surged up from his chest, making him cough all over again. He managed to down half the glass without

choking again and finally took a deep breath. “While I recover my wits, tell me someought about yerself. Ye were Amy’s companion? Niall’s lass?”

She nodded. “My parents passed away when I was seventeen. I took work as a seamstress for a time, but I wasn’t terribly efficient at it, and ... earning enough money to keep a roof over my head began to prove difficult. My aunt, Victoria Baxter, agreed to allow me to live with her family if I would help look after her daughter, Amelia-Rose. There are fifteen years between us, so I nearly felt like an aunt rather than a cousin, but we got on well.”

Despite her matter-of-fact tone, Brennan could imagine that being suddenly alone at seventeen, likely raised properly but without the funds to have a Society debut or make a good match, would have been terrifying. And then agreeing to become in essence a surrogate parent to a youngster, knowing she was turning her back on having her own children and her own life ... This was a practical lass sitting opposite him. “But now ye’re companion to Lady Aldriss.”

She nodded, fiddling with one of his sketch papers. “Aunt Victoria had some very ... strong opinions about the life Amelia-Rose should have. But she and Niall seemed so well matched, and—Well, I decided to help them elope. No one should have to live a miserable life when other options are so clearly available. Aunt Victoria rightly accused me of failing in my duties and sacked me, but Lady Aldriss was kind enough to take me in. I know it was purely out of gratitude for me helping her son find a bride, because I am certainly not an exceptional companion, but here we are.”

“Aye, here we are. A man with a ruined face who tries to imagine perfect buildings, and a lass who enjoys solitude and reading trying to keep track of a busy countess’s social schedule.”

“Your face isn’t ruined,” she protested. “You look very rakish with the eye patch.” Her cheeks darkened again. “In my opinion, of course. But I believe you know you’re quite well favored.”

Eithne had always said so, and the lasses before Eithne, but since then all the females seemed to think it some sort of sin to tell him that he looked like a man when he was a widower. And that wasn't much of a description. Aye, he had a mirror, but mostly what he saw there was an eye patch and a mouth that seemed to grimace more than it did smile. "Thank ye for saying so. Ye're a fair flower, yerself. But tell me, what room would ye want to be the largest in a house that belonged to ye?"

She put her arms around her own sides, hugging herself. "If I had a house? Oh, it would have a massive library, two stories tall with ladders for climbing to reach the books up on the highest shelves." She smiled again, the expression lighting her face. "Perhaps I'd even have two libraries, one for actual histories and science, and one for works of fiction."

"That's a great many books. I reckon the floor would have to have extra beams beneath it to carry the weight."

"You know, that's something I would never have considered." Her grin flashed. "I would have made myself a lovely library, only to have it all collapse into the cellar."

"Nae if I were yer architect," he countered, bending his head to sketch out a wide, high-ceilinged room with bookshelves reaching twenty feet up in the air, divided by tall windows and countered by long, wide tables and comfortable chairs in the middle of the room. He fiddled with a few more details, not entirely certain why he felt the need to do so, then handed it over to her. "How close did I get?"

For a long moment she gazed at it silently, and he began to wonder if he was just being an idiot, acting foolish because she was the first woman he'd met in seven years who made him want to smile. Who made him want to linger in her company.

Then a tear rolled down one pale cheek, and he reckoned he'd done even worse than insult her. "I'm sorry, lass," he said, reaching for the paper. "I was only playing."

Jane jerked the sketch out of his reach. "This is so lovely," she said, another tear sliding down the other cheek. "Don't you

dare make light of it. May I keep it?"

"Aye, of course."

As she gazed at it, he had the strongest, oddest urge to storm out and build her a library just like the one he'd sketched for her. To give her a lifetime's worth of books and a very comfortable chair in which to sit and read them, without having to worry about being at anyone else's beck and call.

He looked at her all over again, or what he could see with her sitting at the table as she was. She was fairly tall, with that tight-pulled black hair and rich chocolate eyes. Small-bosomed, she was, and nearly straight as a fence post, but he imagined that if she stopped feeling like every bit of food she ate made her more obligated to someone else, she might have a few curves to her. In a sense she seemed like a hearth fire at dawn, grown cold except for deep down where the embers still smoldered. All she needed was for someone to give her life a good stir and she would burst into bright flame.

"Do you live here, at Aldriss Park?" she asked, and he wondered if that was an abrupt change of subject or if he'd simply missed the first part of her conversation because he was staring again.

"Nae. I've a cottage at the top of the hill above Pethiloch, but a mile from here. My house doesnae have a name, but I like it well enough."

"Yes, most of us don't live in houses with names, do we? I think they—the ones who do—forget that, sometimes. But I suppose if you own three or four or five homes, you need to name them or no one will know to which one you're referring."

"Exactly. Though this place—Aldriss Park—is near four hundred years old. I reckon if a house can keep itself together for that long, mayhap it *does* deserve a name."

"I suppose you have the right of it. Did you design your house, or purchase it?"

"I designed it. My da's family owned the land, but the wee cottage that sat on it wouldnae keep out a light breeze."

They sat and chatted about his house, and the house Coll wanted for himself and Temperance or Persephone or whatever name she chose to go by, and about books and whatever else came to his mind to keep her there at the table. Now that she'd begun to relax a little he could clearly see that she had a quick wit and a sharp sense of humor, even if it seemed more designed to cut at herself than anything else.

“There ye are,” Coll’s voice boomed from the doorway.

Jumping, Brennan looked up. Beside his cousin stood a lovely lass in a deep blue gown, her honey-colored hair a jumble of curls. He stood. “Ye’d be Lady Glendarril, I presume.”

Across from him, Jane Bansil stood as well. “Excuse me,” she said in a hushed voice. “I need to see to Lady Aldriss.”

With that she vanished through the second doorway. Brennan had to remain, making more notes about a house that would be grander than any he could ever hope to reside in, and his thoughts on a much more practical theme—where and when he would be able to find an excuse to chat with Jane Bansil again.

Chapter Three

“What do you mean, ‘we aren’t celebrating Christmas’?” Eloise MacTaggart-Harris demanded, jabbing a finger at her middle brother. “It’s only three days away!”

Aden finished his bite of venison and washed that down with a swallow of whisky. “Just what I said, *Piuthar*. This is Scotland. We dunnae celebrate Christmas here.”

“Why the devil not?”

“Eloise,” her mother admonished, though from Lady Aldriss’s grimace she knew precisely what Aden was talking about and had intended to ignore it until someone brought it up. At least that was what Jane had to assume, since she’d spent the last day and a half wrapping and boxing gifts brought all the way up with them from London.

“It’s illegal here,” Aden returned. “It’s been illegal here since Cromwell.”

“But Cromwell banned Christmas nearly two hundred years ago. And it only lasted for what, fifteen years?” Eloise’s new husband, Matthew Harris, put in. “If I recall my tutor’s droning on about it correctly, that is.”

“In England, it only lasted fifteen years. Here, nae a one of yer English kings or parliaments bothered to lift the ban. We go to church, and we go about our day, just like any other day.”

“But I brought gifts,” Eloise protested.

Lord Aldriss chuckled from the head of the table. “Gifts, my dear, are what Hogmanay is for. That and setting things afire.”

Jane put a hand to her chest. *Good heavens*. She knew the MacTaggerts were thought of as barbarians by the rest of London, but for the most part they’d been charming and rather warmhearted. But this didn’t sound at all civilized. Or safe.

“Setting what things afire?” Miranda MacTaggert, Aden’s bride and Matthew Harris’s sister, asked, lifting an eyebrow. “Do I need to hide my clothes?”

“Nae,” Aden answered. “First, we clean the house, and the fireplaces especially, to be rid of the burdens of the year. On Hogmanay eve we *saine* the house—bless the house, I mean—by sprinkling about water from a river crossed by both the living and the dead. Then we burn juniper branches in all the fireplaces to choke out the rest of the bad spirits hiding in the corners.”

“After that,” Niall took up from Aden, “we throw open all the doors and windows to send the regrets and burdens away and let in the fresh air of the new year. That’s followed by a dram of whisky and breakfast.”

“This sounds like an excuse to clean the house,” Amy said, frowning. “And it seems very smoky.”

“Aye, and uncivilized, I reckon,” her husband, Niall, returned with a grin. “But that’s nae all of it. We have to all sing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ together, holding hands, and then we go visiting the houses of relatives and friends. It’s good luck to be the first guest of the new year. We begin that right at midnight.”

“I heard it’s especially good luck if your guest is tall, dark, and handsome,” Temperance, Lady Glendarril, said with a sly smile. “No doubt the three of you were very good luck.”

“That depends on who ye ask, my lass,” Coll rumbled with a faint grin.

Jane immediately conjured an image of tall, dark, and handsome Brennan Andrews. He’d spent a great deal of the

day at Aldriss House yesterday, but today he must have been in his quiet home doing his sketches and measuring, while she'd been attempting to box a saddle. That hadn't gone at all well.

“And then we sleep the rest of the day, I hope?” Amy countered, rubbing her pregnant belly.

“Ye can if ye wish, love. But after breakfast we exchange gifts. When evening comes again, we all go down to the village and light torches. Coll's been known to swing a fireball about his head for a good mile as we parade along.”

“Nae this year. I dunnae wish to fling sparks on any of the lasses,” Coll said.

“Of course ye will, Coll,” his father protested. “It's our tradition!”

“Anyway,” Aden took up again, “then we all gather at the shore of Loch an Daimh and cast the flames into the water.”

“To cast out the rest of the evil spirits, I presume?” Temperance asked.

“Aye. If ye can, ye should always begin the year with nae evil spirits in yer house. Or yer life.” Aden grinned.

Jane couldn't tell if they believed all of the superstition or if they simply, as Lord Aldriss had put it, liked burning things. It seemed more wild than festive to her, but of course none of the other women in the house seemed to think it all intimidating. Lady Aldriss had put on a frown, but then as the matriarch she was the most practical of them all.

“You do know it'll be the first of January. In the Scottish Highlands,” the countess said. “We are not going to risk anyone getting fever or chills.”

“We march with damned kilts on, woman,” Lord Aldriss protested. “Ye can bundle up as much as ye like. In fact, I recall ye carrying a torch or two yerself in the first few years ye were here.”

The countess blushed. “That was a very long time ago.”

“I’d like to drive away bad spirits,” Amy said. “I have a few I’d like never to see again.”

“As do I,” Miranda said feelingly.

“I will definitely be marching with a torch,” Temperance MacTaggart added. “Perhaps two torches.”

“Before we all get carried away with torches,” Eloise put in, “I want to be certain I understand. We don’t exchange gifts at Christmas, but we do on New Year’s Day, yes?”

“Aye.”

“Well, that’s fine, then. You should have begun with that, Aden.”

The middle MacTaggart brother shrugged, his shoulders brushing against his longish hair. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Well, at least now Jane had an additional week to finish wrapping all the gifts. Lady Aldriss might have hired her out of charity, but that only left Jane more determined to be useful. And the countess wasn’t the only one who’d asked for assistance. At least wrapping and boxing gave her mind time to wander, even if it had spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about yesterday in the library with Brennan Andrews. She couldn’t recall a more pleasant day—or a more interesting man.

As dinner ended, the stout, ginger-haired butler, Pogan, approached Lord Glendarril with a note. In London it would have been delivered on a proper silver salver, but here the butler simply handed it over.

Coll opened it, then frowned. “Brennan wants to know if I can go see him tomorrow at ten o’clock. He has some more questions and wants to look like a proper architect with an office and drawing board, I reckon. I cannae go, though; I’ve a meeting in the village.”

“I’ll go,” Temperance said.

“I can accompany Lady Glendarril,” Jane blurted, no doubt startling everyone who’d forgotten she was even there.

“Aye, that’ll do,” Coll agreed. “Brennan likely has a few more questions about paint colors and such.”

Temperance wrinkled her nose. “Then I’m definitely going. I’m half convinced you would wish everything painted in clan Ross colors, with brown curtains.”

He leaned sideways to plant a kiss on his wife’s temple. “As long as ye dunnae choose white lace curtains, I reckon I’ll be doing naught but nodding my head, anyway. And thank ye, Jane.”

“Certainly,” Jane chirped, hoping she didn’t look as warm as she felt.

“What happened to Cousin Brennan’s eye, anyway?” Eloise asked.

“Yes,” Lady Aldriss seconded. “He had two of them the last time I saw him.”

“It was my fault,” Coll stated, a brief scowl crossing his face. “I’d just gotten Nuckelavee, and he didnae mind as well then as he does now. Th—”

“Nuckelavee doesnae mind anyone but ye, and he nae once has,” Niall countered. “That horse is a devil.”

“Aye, but he’s *my* devil. Anyway, Brennan came by to see him, and said he didnae look so fierce. I’d just been thrown off into a field of thistle, and I wasnae feeling very friendly, so I told him he could have the black if he could ride him.”

“Coll, you shouldn’t have,” his sister admonished.

“I was eighteen, and Brennan was two-and-twenty, so dunnae ye go saying that I led him astray. But I shouldnae have let him ride Nuckelavee. Nae when I couldnae do it yet.” He sighed. “Anyway, he stayed aboard for about ten seconds, and then Nuckelavee jumped in the air and landed on his back through a fence. Brennan took a nail down his face and broke his leg. The leg mended; his eye didnae.” He dug into his plate again. “But that was eleven years ago and he’s nae once held a grudge about it, so done is done. His wife didnae look at me too kindly for a time, though.”

Murmurs of “poor Eithne” went around the table at that, and Coll even crossed himself. Brennan had told Jane that he’d lost his wife seven years earlier. He’d been married for at least four years, then—not that that mattered. He’d been a husband, and he’d lost his wife. The amount of time they’d had together didn’t seem to matter as much as the fact that he’d seemed genuinely to love her, and that now his house felt quiet and alone.

“I was about to take that wager,” Aden said after a moment, “so I feel more than a wee bit grateful to Brennan for doing it in my stead.”

“Good heavens,” the countess breathed. “When I think of the peril the three of you were in after I left Scotland, it keeps me awake at night.”

“Ye reckon ye could have stopped me from a damned thing I wanted to do?”

Jane looked over at Coll MacTaggart. At more than five inches above six feet and all muscle, the viscount likely had never been stopped from doing anything—except perhaps by his bride. She wished Temperance well, because being married to such an imposing man would terrify her. Just speaking to him gave her the shivers.

“That isn’t the point,” his mother countered. “You needed a guiding hand, and clearly your father declined to provide it.”

“And yet there they are,” the earl stated. “Nae a one dead and all of them tall, fine lads wed to the best yer England has to offer.”

As the two of them began to argue over which had had the greater hand in seeing their sons married, Jane went back to picking at her dinner. Men like the MacTaggerts were a large reason she remained rather thankful to have missed her debut Season and all the ones that followed. If one of them had decided to pursue her, she would likely have fainted to the floor. It would have been worse, though, to have attended all the dances and the recitals and the dinners and have no one notice her at all. That was the far more likely outcome of her

imaginary trip through Society. At least now part of her role was to avoid being noticed. She excelled at that.

As dinner ended, everyone adjourned to the drawing room. The countess gestured at her as everyone began to settle in to listen to Aden read a Scottish ghost story. “A word, my dear?”

“Of course, my lady. Should I fetch you a wrap?”

“No, Jane.” Lady Aldriss took Jane’s arm, pulling her away from the others. “I know you don’t think yourself necessary here.”

Jane blushed. “My lady, I am exceedingly grate—”

“The thing is, Lord Aldriss has asked me to join him for a holiday, directly after Hogmanay. A month or more, in Italy and Spain.” The countess’s mouth curved in a slight smile. “Places I’ve been, but where I once asked him to take me, and he refused.”

“Oh, that’s lovely, then,” Jane offered, since something seemed required.

“Yes, it is. You need to make a decision, though. You may accompany me, in which case we will assume you mean to remain in my employ, or you may remain here with the rest of the family through the winter as our ... guest. For however long you wish to stay, really. Or I will happily write you a letter of recommendation if you wish to find another position closer to London. I know you are more comfortable there.”

That was it, then. Accept that she would keep Lady Aldriss company for the remainder of that woman’s life, whether she was necessary or not; be reconciled to being a useless bit of charity the MacTaggerts would feel obligated to include on all of their jaunts and holidays; or leave and find a position less auspicious, if more useful, with one of the countess’s elderly friends. And then do the same thing over and over again until she was too old to be useful to anyone.

“I see,” she said slowly. “When do you need my answer?”

“By Hogmanay, I would think.” Lady Aldriss squeezed her hand. “You are loved and wanted here, Jane. I want you to feel that you have some stability, whatever you choose.”

Jane nodded, feeling rather hollowed-out inside. “Of course. Do you require me now?”

“You don’t wish to stay?”

“I’m a little tired,” she returned, “but of course I’ll stay if you need me.”

“Jane, you ... Of course you may go.” The countess sighed. “Or remain. And since we have an additional week now to box gifts, please take tomorrow to do as you please. After you accompany Temperance to Brennan’s home, that is. I may go down to the village for a bit more shopping.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Jane said, dipping a curtsy and leaving the room before anyone could call her back, and before she could hear the silence if they didn’t.

Upstairs she walked to her window and looked outside at the silent trees and drifts of snow. Visiting Europe for weeks might have been a dream for other young ladies, including all of the ones presently downstairs. For her, well, she didn’t have Italian, and her Spanish was horrible. In addition, Lord and Lady Aldriss, whatever they might say, were of course attempting a reconciliation. The last thing the countess needed was to be worrying over whether her companion had been overset at having to attend some soiree where she didn’t know the language.

“Damnation,” she muttered, lowering her forehead against the cold glass. Making a decision was difficult enough. Making one that would decide her entire future ... Heavens, the last decision she’d made had seen her sacked. The employment with Lady Aldriss had simply happened, without her ever seeking it.

Blowing out her breath, she retrieved the Scottish architecture book and sat by her small fire. Dwelling on the impossible now would only keep her awake. Determinedly she opened the book and began reading.

Most of the dwellings in the Highlands seemed to have been either mud and peat huts or giant stone fortresses meant to keep the English and the other clans at bay, but the author

had an amusing, light touch and a great many interesting stories to go with the facts and histories. In her opinion, Mr. B. Conchar might have had more literary success if he'd simply told the tales without the architectural details.

Every time she read the word "architecture" her mind went to Brennan Andrews and the way he'd so effortlessly sketched the library of her dreams right in front of her eyes. She meant to have the drawing framed as soon as she could manage it—not that she anticipated having a wall on which to hang it anytime soon—and presently had it pressed between other papers in her small writing desk to keep it safe.

Around her the house began to quiet, but she kept reading until her eyes would no longer stay open. Then she closed the book and wandered back over to one of the nearest of her trio of bedchamber windows. The pale moonlight turned the snow outside a silvery blue. It looked frightfully cold, but she couldn't deny that the effect was lovely and a bit magical. No wonder Highlanders still felt the need to burn juniper branches and light torches to banish dark spirits. If those things could live anywhere, it would be here.

And there she stood, indulging her imagination when she had practicalities to decide. "Nodcock," she muttered, and pulled the curtains closed. Back when she'd lived with her parents in a small cottage in Derbyshire she'd had dreams—simple ones, things she could imagine happening to her. Her, married to a solicitor or an army captain, as opposed to her being taken by pirates and ending up a princess on some foreign shore. Those imaginings were for young ladies with wealth and comfort to buoy their dreams.

But then her parents had died within six months of each other, and repaying doctors and other debts she hadn't known about until afterward had taken the house. That was when she'd stopped daydreaming. She hadn't had time for it. In fact, until yesterday she couldn't remember engaging in such fanciful imaginings. Perhaps Scotland did possess a little magic.

Regardless, as she neatly folded her gown and pulled on her simple white night rail, she allowed her mind to wander

toward a one-eyed Scottish widower with a clear talent for drawing and who, she imagined, would be fond of sitting by the fire in the evenings reading aloud in his charming brogue to his beloved, who of course very closely resembled herself.

There would of course be hand-holding and kissing and other things that became rather heated, because he would of course be a splendid and virile hus—

Bagpipes screeched through her brain, and Jane sat straight up in bed. “Oh, for God’s sake!” she hissed, only belatedly realizing that light shone around the edges of the curtains and that she had, in fact, been dreaming. And some very intimate dreams, at that.

According to the small clock on the mantel it was once again six o’clock in the morning, just as it had been yesterday and the day before when the torture had begun. Given the lack of success she’d had in ignoring the racket previously, this morning she flung off the covers and got dressed, this time choosing a long-sleeved brown and yellow gown. It was still frightfully plain, but it was also her best.

As she reached the foyer the butler, Pogan, straightened from tying a rope about the neck of Brògan, the black English spaniel Aden had adopted after she had stolen one of his boots back in London. Four black puppies, now nearly the same size as their dam, bounded about the butler’s feet.

“Good morning, Miss Jane,” he said, nodding. “The dogs and I are about to make the rounds in the garden.”

“I’ll see to that,” she decided. “You have a great many other things to see to.”

“That I do,” he returned with a smile, handing over the rope. “Thank ye. I reckon ye’re better acquainted with them than I am, anyway.”

“That I am.”

She bent down to scratch Brògan between the ears, then headed outside with the furry pack when Pogan opened the door for them all. There had originally been five puppies, but Smythe, the butler at Oswell House, had been gifted one of

them. They'd been born on his bed, after all, and he did seem to adore them.

Brògan stayed by her side as she picked her way through the light snow to the garden, but the pups charged out in every direction, black dots zooming across the white ground. Cold crept up her legs beneath her skirts, and she tugged her heavy wrap closer around her shoulders.

The bagpipes were even louder outside, and she looked toward the roof of Aldriss Park to see a kilt-clad man standing there silhouetted against the sky, pipes in his arms. She wanted to throw a snowball at him, but she'd never be able to reach that far. Instead, she trod up and down the garden, the cold slowly leaving her legs as she marched.

Walking the dogs was likely the most useful thing she'd done since she'd joined the Oswell-MacTaggart household, she reflected. Oh, she detested being someone's charitable project, even when the someone was as kind and generous as Lady Aldriss. The truth was, though, that she required that charity. Without it, she might well have been on the streets by now. That put her new trio of choices into a better perspective, but they remained choices. And she needed to decide.

"Jane, what in the world are you doing out there?" came from above and behind her. "You'll catch your death!"

She turned to look up at the house. Lady Aldriss leaned out a window, a scowl on her face. "I'm just helping with the dogs!" she called back. "I'll be in in a moment. Do you need me?"

"This is your day to do as you please, remember? Just do it indoors, where it's warm."

"Yes, my lady."

The countess retreated, and the window shut again. Yes, Lady Aldriss and all the MacTaggerts were kind and generous, and they told her she was part of the family, but if she hadn't stood up for Amy, they wouldn't even know her name.

After another ten minutes she couldn't ignore her cold fingers and toes any longer, and she herded the dogs back into

the house. Thank goodness she'd volunteered to accompany Lady Glendarril to Mr. Andrews's home, because she generally had no idea what to do with herself when left to her own devices. Read, of course, but when she closed a book she always found herself back in her own skin, and that did, on occasion, grate.

Shortly before nine o'clock Lord Glendarril and his great black and nearly murderous Friesian warhorse galloped down to the village. Thankfully, Lady Glendarril decided they should set off for Mr. Andrews's house before the rest of the clan could head out to the stables to begin making torches for Hogmanay.

"Such strange customs," the actress and viscountess said, settling back in the heavy coach.

"They all seem ancient, which I rather like," Jane offered, taking the rear-facing seat opposite.

"Yes. A torch parade on a whim might seem silly, but knowing it's been done for the past five hundred years lends it some dignity." Temperance Hartwood sent her a sideways glance. "This must not go beyond us, but do you find the bagpipes at dawn as annoying as I do?"

Jane sat forward. "Oh, yes. They're horrible!"

"Coll says it announces to everyone in the valley that the laird is well and all is calm, which I imagine is another ancient tradition, but I find it very alarming every blasted morning."

"So is there a more strident bit of music they play when all is not calm?" Jane wondered, blushing when she realized she'd spoken aloud.

Temperance, though, only laughed. "I hate even to imagine it." Stifling a yawn, she turned to look out the window. "The mornings have been lovely here, but I'm still more accustomed to *very* late nights and sleeping well into the day."

"But now you're Lady Glendarril. And eventually you'll be Lady Aldriss, and the bagpipes will be on *your* roof."

"Then the bagpipes will begin playing at noon every day, or the piper will find that the laird of the house is not at all well,

because I will have murdered him.” She grinned. “Although as you said, that would likely only make the tunes worse.”

Of all the MacTaggerts, Jane likely understood Temperance the least. They were the closest in age of all the females, with Temperance but five years younger than she was, but this was a woman who’d had wealth and family growing up and had willingly turned her back on both to avoid being pushed into a marriage she didn’t want. And of all things, she’d chosen to make a living as a stage actress. Standing in front of hordes of people every night, people just waiting for her to make a misstep, and she’d wowed them all.

“Were you ever afraid?” she asked, knowing she would be better off simply keeping her mouth shut rather than risking inserting her foot into it. “Onstage, I mean.”

“No,” the viscountess returned, facing Jane again. “Not onstage. Before I stepped onstage, yes. The anticipation, I suppose, the worry that I would forget all my lines or trip and fall into the audience or catch my costume on fire on the footlights. Once I stepped out, though, well, the reality I suppose was far less frightening than all of my imaginings.”

Perhaps that was her difficulty, Jane decided. She spent a great deal of time anticipating trouble and never had that moment of metaphorically stepping onstage. Stifling a sigh, she turned her own gaze outside.

The village was larger than she’d expected, with two or three dozen shops, taverns, and various other buildings, and four or five times that many homes, with a large church in the center, and a curving main street with public stables at one end and a small waterfront and docks at the other.

Everything looked quaint and pretty with the layer of snow everywhere, though she imagined in the springtime the road would be nearly impassable from all the mud. The coach continued up past the stable and around the hill just beyond, winding upward as they climbed. At the top it flattened out, with three homes well spaced from one another occupying the crest.

They rocked to a stop in front of the last house, which was bordered by a white wooden fence and a small front garden that must have been lovely in springtime but now sat bleak and icy. The front door opened and Brennan Andrews stepped outside, pulling on a coat as he approached. “Thank ye for coming here to meet me,” he said, pulling open the coach’s door and offering a hand to Lady Glendarril. “All my papers are here, and they dunnae suffer the cold and wet at all well.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” the viscountess said. “Coll informed you that he has a meeting?”

“Aye. And ye’ve...” He turned, and his one-eyed gaze met Jane’s. “Ye’ve brought someone much easier on the eye in his stead, for which I thank ye,” he continued smoothly, though she had no idea what he’d originally meant to say.

He caught her gloved fingers in his. Firming his grip a little, he helped her down to the snowy ground. “Good morning,” she said belatedly.

“Good morning, lass,” he returned, still holding her fingers. “I’ve put on a pot and found some tea, as I hear ye English lasses prefer that to coffee.”

“Hot tea sounds wonderful,” she commented, abruptly wishing she could put this moment beneath glass and keep it forever. Just her and Brennan Andrews standing in the snow and holding hands, his fingers warm through her gloves.

“If we stay outside any longer,” Temperance said, a shiver in her voice, “I’m going to have to request a dram of whisky in that tea.”

Brennan released Jane’s hand. “Aye. Let’s go in then, shall we?”

And the moment ended. Her breath visible in the air, Jane stepped sideways to allow the two actual participants in the day’s meeting to precede her. Halfway to the door, though, Brennan turned around to face her.

“Where are my manners?” he muttered, stepping back and offering his arm. “I’m happy to show ye my house, Jane. I hope ye like it.”

Why did he hope she liked his house? And why did sudden, sharp excitement dig through her chest in response? “I’m certain I will,” she said aloud, putting her hand on his forearm and keeping her mouth firmly closed over her silly questions—and the very small, very quiet hope that the answers were the stuff of her daydreams.

Chapter Four

She'd come. He'd sought about for an hour last night, trying to figure a way to include Jane Bansil in his invitation, but he hadn't been able to conjure a reason that didn't make him sound like a lunatic. She wasn't precisely a servant, but she was in the countess's employ. He couldn't invite her for tea without raising every eyebrow in the household and sending attention in her direction—attention that she wouldn't want. But there she was.

As Brennan and his guests walked into his modest foyer and then turned right to enter his office, he reached around Lady Glendarril to straighten a stack of books half collapsed on his windowsill. Coll and all the locals who used his services knew he tended to surround himself with clutter; one never knew where one might find inspiration for a fireplace or a staircase.

Abruptly, though, his office seemed to be full of rubbish, disheveled when he could easily have put it into order. He lifted a stack of papers off the second chair facing his desk and set it on the floor in the corner. His sudden obsession with organization didn't have anything to do with the pretty viscountess taking the seat he offered her, either. Hell, he'd had a duke in the house once and hadn't bothered to straighten a damned thing.

No, his unexpected nerves had everything to do with the brown-eyed lady's companion taking the second chair as he held it for her. Highborn ladies accustomed to having a myriad of servants cleaning up after them would be more likely to

notice his disarray, he supposed, but Jane—well, it mattered that she not have a poor impression of his home.

“What was it you wanted to show us?” Lady Glendarril prompted, her quick smile taking any reprimand out of her words.

Because yes, he was staring again. Clearing his throat, Brennan sat at the far side of his desk from the ladies and turned his sketchbook to face the viscountess. “I made three versions of how I interpreted yours and Coll’s wishes for the exterior of the house,” he said, setting the three pages side by side. “I know nae a one of them will be perfect, but if ye could go over each element with me, I’ll end with a much clearer view that hopefully better matches yers.”

“Goodness,” Lady Glendarril murmured, looking at first one sketch, then the next. “These are very grand.”

“Coll claims that this will be where he spends the rest of his life,” Brennan commented. “I suppose ye should be moving back to Aldriss once he takes the earldom, but the brothers are so close, he may just leave it to Aden to live there. So I’m attempting to give ye a house for now, and a house that’ll still suit when he’s a clan Ross chieftain.”

“I’m very glad you have some knowledge of the inner workings of the MacTaggerts,” Temperance said feelingly. “I’ve lived with them for six months, but their roles in England were very different than they are back in the Highlands.” She reached out, touching the middle sketch. “I like the portico here, but the Ionic columns from the first sketch are ... warmer, I think. More welcoming.”

He drew a line from the columns out to a blank space and wrote “Ionic” upside down. “Ye could stain them brown if ye like,” he commented, cocking his head to view the drawings. “Give the house that warmer feel, even with all the white stone on the exterior.”

“I like that. Yes. And perhaps color the windowsills or the exterior shutters to match.” She indicated the shutters he’d added to the third sketch.

He made a note to add shutters, glancing at Jane as he did so. She sat still, but her gaze roamed the bookcase just to her right. “Ye’ll find most of these books in the Aldriss library, as well,” he said, “except for the ones on the center shelf there. Those are a bit technical to qualify as light reading.”

“I’ve been reading the book you recommended,” she said, meeting his gaze. “It’s quite enjoyable, really. A bit technical, as you say, but the tales that go with the various architectural examples are quite entertaining. Do you have anything else by B. Conchar?”

His heart thudded. “Ye liked it?” he asked, no doubt frightening her with his absurd grin.

Jane nodded. “I did. He’s quite a good writer.”

“I ... Thank ye.”

That made her scowl, her delicate brows drawing together. “Why are you thanking me?”

“The, um—well, ye see...” He grimaced. “My middle name is Conchar. Brennan Conchar Andrews. I wasnae certain how the book would be received, so I didnae use my own name entirely. It was a wee bit silly in retrospect, I suppose, but I was only twenty when I wrote it, and architects are a stuffy lot, for the most part. I—”

“Just a moment. *You* wrote *Scottish Castles and Highlands History: A Tangled Web*?”

“Aye. Coll said I should have called it *Blood and Buildings*, but I rarely take his advice seriously.”

Lady Glendarril snorted. “He is rather straightforward, I’ve discovered.”

Brennan blinked. He’d forgotten for a moment that the viscountess was even there, which would never do, since she and her husband were the ones who’d hired him. “I didnae mean to offend, I hope ye know.”

“Oh, I’m not offended. I do mean to use that title suggestion against him sometime in the near future, however.”

Her grin deepened. “He’s also mentioned that *Much Ado About Nothing* should be retitled *Nae a Soul Says What They Mean*.”

He laughed. “That’s Coll, for certain.” Shifting a little, he attempted to refocus his attention on the task at hand. “Let’s have a look at the windows, since we’re talking about shutters.”

For the next hour he managed to avoid looking at Jane Bansil for the most part, even if she didn’t leave his thoughts for more than a second at a time. She hadn’t responded aloud to his admission that he was, in fact, B. Conchar, but he was absurdly pleased that’s she’d admitted to enjoying the book before she’d known the identity of its author.

When he couldn’t think of a single additional question to ask about three rather simple drawings, he stacked them up and asked the ladies if they wished another cup of tea. Both refused, of course, and so he ushered them toward the front door.

As Jane passed him her fingers brushed his, and he abruptly felt electrified. Whether it had been by accident or on purpose, she’d touched him, and he felt it all the way to his bones. “Ah, I forgot something,” he muttered. “Jane, will ye assist me? We’ll be but a moment, my lady.”

“I’m in no hurry to return to the snow,” the viscountess commented, continuing on into the foyer.

Wordlessly he took Jane’s arm and led her back around the corner to his office. As soon as they were inside, he faced her, cupped her face in his hands, and leaned down to kiss her. She would no doubt be shocked and dismayed, as gentle a soul as she seemed, but—

Her hands winding around his, she lifted on her toes to kiss him back. Silently, he backed her against the wall, taking her mouth hungrily and forcing himself not to paw at her clothes. She kissed like a woman who hadn’t been kissed back nearly often enough, but he couldn’t fault her a whit for heat or enthusiasm. She shifted her hands to his lapels, wrapping her fingers into them fiercely, and that aroused him further. Jane Bansil wanted him.

His cock jumped, reminding him forcefully that he might have lost an eye, but the rest of his parts worked just fine. It had been forever since he'd been interested in a lass, but thank God he remembered how to kiss, and how to hold on to his lust hard enough that he wouldn't embarrass himself.

Finally, he broke the kiss, pulling in a quick breath. With the viscountess just around the corner he didn't dare say anything that might compromise Jane's reputation, but he ran his thumb along her lower lip, then straightened a few stray locks of her hair with his fingers before he gave in and kissed her once more. When he couldn't find another excuse to keep them in the room, he grabbed a book without even noting the title, shook out his coat, and nodded at her.

When she nodded back, he stepped past her, and she followed him out the door. The viscountess stood looking out the front window beside the doorway, and he handed her the book. "Coll wanted this," he said, hoping Lady Glendarril wouldn't ask why he'd needed Jane's assistance in pulling a book off a shelf.

She took the book, though, tucking it under her arm. "Thank you, Brennan."

"I'll do a new sketch for ye with all the bits ye liked," he continued. "Give me a day or two, and I'll bring it by for ye and Coll to see. Once that's approved, I'll start on the technical drawings."

He wanted to go do it immediately and bring it by before dinner, but that was only because he wanted to see Jane again. Brennan lowered his gaze to Miss Bansil's backside as they left the house for the coach. Doing haphazard work would only have Coll asking him what the devil was wrong with him, and that would never do.

"Are ye still having a Christmas Eve dinner?" he asked.

The viscountess stepped up into the coach, then leaned out again. "Of course. I hear it's tradition."

"Aye, it has been, but things at Aldriss are more than a wee bit different, now."

“They aren’t so different that we wouldn’t have MacTaggart family and friends over—even if we’re not to celebrate anything.” She smiled. “Aside from that, you’ll provide someone else for us to ply for information about Hogmanay.”

“I’m happy to do that, my lady.”

“Good. And you must call me Temperance. Or Persie, if you prefer.”

“I’ll work myself up to it eventually, my lady.” Helping Jane into the coach as an excuse to take her hand again, he grinned. “I reckon ye’ll see me tomorrow evening, then.”

“That will be pleasant, I’m certain,” Jane returned, taking the rear-facing seat in the coach, her color high and her gaze darting anywhere but his face.

Aye, it would be pleasant, if he could keep his hands off her.

Jane kept her hands in her lap and her gaze out the coach window. *Good heavens.* So *that* was the kissing that Amy and Eloise and Miranda and even Temperance made such a ruckus about. She felt devoured and set ablaze all at the same time. And even more glorious than the kissing was the fact that *he’d* kissed *her*.

She hadn’t imagined a connection between them, nor was the interest one-sided. What it all meant she had no idea, but in all her thirty-three years she’d never felt so close to ... bursting. She wanted to sing, and dance, and spin about in a circle with her arms outflung. Touching him, being touched by him, made all her worries simply fizzle into smoke, unimportant and unnoticed—for the moment, anyway.

“I don’t know why Coll would be interested in the topic of flooring,” Lady Glendarril said, turning the book with which Brennan had gifted her in her hands, “but Coll does have more dimensions than I ever would have expected on first meeting him.”

“No doubt,” Jane returned, feeling some response was needed.

“Are you feeling well, Jane?” the viscountess pursued, setting the book aside. “Your color is high.”

“It’s just the cold, I think.” *And the fact that a man, a delicious man, kissed me.* “I don’t feel at all feverish.”

“Good. I think we all will need to be fit enough come Hogmanay to run away from the house if the men should accidentally set it ablaze.”

Putting a smile on her face, Jane nodded. “They do seem very enthusiastic about the bits with fire. Not to change the subject, but I think your home is going to be lovely. And with a view that London could never match.”

“I hope so. I grew up overlooking a lake in Cumberland, but this...” She gestured at the land outside the coach. “It’s magnificent here. I don’t think I could ever tire of it.”

“Would you give up the stage for it?” Jane asked, then mentally clamped a hand over her mouth when that earned her a rather piercing look. “Someday, I mean,” she added belatedly.

“Between you and me,” Temperance said slowly, her voice more thoughtful than Jane expected, “I have a contract for the coming Season with the Saint Genesius Theater. I will honor it. After that, well, I don’t wish to be some entitled woman putting on plays to elevate her own sense of self-worth. I mean, Charlie Huddle—he’s the manager at the Saint Genesius—would feel obligated to allow me to perform now. I’m a viscountess. I’d no longer be earning parts on my own merits.” Scowling, she fiddled with her gloves. “Does that make sense?”

“It does, but being married doesn’t diminish your talent. Or your enjoyment of the career you chose. There must be a balance somewhere.” *Balance.* That was what she needed, as well. A balance between something she wanted to do and someone who needed her. The more she considered that, the

less sense it made that she could remain, however, with Lady Aldriss.

“I do enjoy it,” Lady Glendarril returned feelingly. “Very much. And I daresay I’m fairly good at it; I did earn all those roles before I married Coll.” She sighed. “I don’t know, Jane. I suppose I’ll figure it out when I have to. I do know that I couldn’t very well expect to play Juliet any longer. She’s too young for me now, and I have this awful dream where I take the stage and begin the balcony soliloquy and everyone laughs and I look down and realize I’m eight months pregnant.” She put a hand over her eyes. “Good God.”

“You could do it, I’d wager,” Jane stated. “You’d simply convince them that you’re a plump Juliet, or something.”

Temperance laughed. “Thank you for that. With a plump Romeo it might suffice. We could call it *Romeo and Juliet: Or, the Overfed Italians*.”

That made Jane chuckle, as well. She liked Temperance Hartwood—or MacTaggert, now—even if she couldn’t imagine standing onstage like the viscountess had done for the previous seven years. Temperance had stood up for herself and had made her own way in the world. Jane had been pushed into doing the same thing and had failed at it.

Except that now her calm, quiet, well-ordered life felt more than a bit off-kilter, and not merely because of the countess’s ultimatum. That would have filled her with dread, but this morning she could feel the just-submerged excitement of a new, unexpected thing tugging at her. This feeling *was* new, and that made it terrifying but at the same time ... hopeful. Was that what it was? Hope? Last night she’d been full of the doldrums. Until she’d begun reading Brennan’s book, that was.

“May I ... May I ask you a question?” she squeaked, then immediately wished she hadn’t said anything at all.

“Of course.”

“Oh, never mind. It—I—Never mind.”

“Very well.” Temperance tilted her head a little, blue eyes speculative. “Do you think Coll and the others know that Brennan Andrews is also B. Conchar, the author?”

“I don’t know. I certainly had no idea.”

“But he writes well, you said.”

“Yes. I enjoyed his stories about the grand houses more than I liked the actual descriptions of how the houses were built, but if a book about architecture can make me smile, as this one did, then I have to say he has some skill.”

She wanted to say more, but gushing about Brennan wouldn’t do anything but make her look silly and desperate. Perhaps she was those things, and perhaps he’d only kissed her out of curiosity or gratitude or something, but she hoped she was the only one who would know that.

She needed to remember that she was not some silly debutante receiving her first kiss; she was a well-on-the-shelf spinster receiving her first kiss. She needed to take it for what it had been—a new experience—and move on. Because she’d more than likely stared at Brennan Andrews so much that he thought her some forward lightskirt and had acted accordingly.

No matter the tingle she’d felt, that made more sense than anything else. He’d seen her desperation and misinterpreted it. If he mentioned it again, she would simply have to set him straight. What was the alternative, after all? That the first stranger on whom she’d set eyes in Scotland ... fancied her? And he just happened to be handsome and clever and well-read?

If she read it in a book, she wouldn’t have believed it. In actuality, it made even less sense, and that was that. Another silly daydream, where she’d managed to make a man believe her to be forward because she had no idea how to converse with anyone. She had actual troubles to decipher. She didn’t need to add imaginary ones into the mix.

“Do you mean to stay on as Lady Aldriss’s companion?” Temperance asked on the tail of that thought.

Jane shook herself out of her foggy thoughts. “Why? Have you heard something?”

“I heard that the countess has offered you a permanent position.”

Oh. All the MacTaggerts likely knew about it, then. That she had to decide which road her life would take. For them, of course, it was a momentary, idle curiosity. Her presence or absence wouldn't affect them, with the possible exception of Amy, for more than a moment. “Lady Aldriss is very kind,” Jane answered carefully. “And I do adore the family. I just ... She has a great many friends and social engagements, and I'm hopeless at that sort of thing. Aside from that, if Lord Aldriss and she do reconcile as they seem to be doing, she won't have much need of me.”

“But do you wish to remain in her employ?”

“I didn't precisely answer that, did I?” Jane grimaced. “I will never find better employment anywhere, but...” Sighing, she shrugged. “I don't know. It's like you and Juliet, I suppose. Do I leave before I become ridiculous?”

“You are not ridiculous. And my future has also taken some turns lately that I never expected.” The toast of London smiled at her. “I suppose we follow where the road leads.”

Jane rather liked that; taking things as they came was much less stressful than attempting to figure out catastrophes and exultations in advance. “And wear sturdy shoes,” she seconded.

Lord Glendarril rode into the Aldriss Park stable yard just as they stepped down from the coach, and Temperance greeted him with a warm smile and the book Brennan had given her. “He said you'd asked for it,” she explained.

“Why the devil would I want a book about marble floors?” Coll asked, opening the book and glaring at it. “Sometimes I reckon my cousin's spent too much time alone.”

“You can ask him tomorrow,” Lady Glendarril returned, wrapping her hand around his muscular forearm. “You should

see the exterior drawings he showed me. Coll, it's ... more than I ever dreamed of."

"Good. More than ye ever dreamed of is precisely what I want to give ye, Temperance." Twining his fingers with hers, he leaned down and kissed his bride.

Abruptly feeling distinctly unwanted, Jane backed away and went into the house. Everywhere she turned, first at Oswell House and now at Aldriss Park, people were kissing and blushing and flirting, deep in the rapture of true love. Even the earl and countess, who'd been apart and feuding for seventeen years, had spent the last six months more together than apart. This holiday to the Continent was the logical next step in their reconciliation, as inconvenient as the timing was for her.

All that aside, perhaps that was why she'd had such romantic thoughts where Brennan Andrews was concerned; she was surrounded by the bloom of new love. It made sense that such nonsense should be on her mind.

Returning to her room, she retrieved Brennan's book and opened it to the first page again. Now that she knew he'd written it, she could hear his voice telling the tales of how various castles and forts had come to be and of the people who had inhabited them.

An entire afternoon to herself, and all she wanted to do was sit and read. Someone more adventurous would no doubt be sledding down the hill behind the house or attempting to skate on the ice along the shore of the loch where the water had frozen. To her, though, a warm fire and a good book was practically perfection. A few weeks ago, she would have called it precisely perfection. Now, though, she felt a bit ... upended. As if she had gone sledding and had ended up with her head buried in a snowbank.

A knock sounded at her door, and she jumped. "Come in!" she called, starting to sit on her book before she remembered that she'd been given permission to do as she pleased.

Her cousin pushed open the door and walked into the room. "I'm going down to the village to visit the jeweler's," Amy

said, shutting the door behind her. “I wanted to find something Niall might like for Hogmanay. I thought you might want to get some fresh air.”

“I’m fine, really,” Jane answered, “though if you want the company, of course I’ll join you.”

“I don’t wish you to do me a favor or feel obligated, Jane. I just ... Do you want to go?”

Jane put a smile on her face. “I really am quite happy sitting here, Amy. I’m employed, I have access to a fine library, and no one sneers at me. They may feel some pity or something, but I can’t do anything about that.”

“No one pities you, dear. We only want you to be happy.”

Carefully she set aside her book. “It seems to me that your idea of me being happy is for me to be someone else.”

“No, that’s not—”

“Isn’t it? I’m not someone who likes crowds or going shopping, or traveling to faraway places in the company of people who would rather be alone. You know that.”

Her cousin sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed with a swish of her green skirts. “Yes, I know. And I know you consider kindness to be charity. You’re leaving us then, aren’t you?”

It was certainly beginning to seem that way. “I haven’t decided anything yet,” she said aloud. “But please don’t worry about me. I am fine. Truly. And you have a baby to prepare for, not to mention the fawning over you’re already receiving from your husband.”

That made Amy grin. “He is very good at spoiling me.” She stood again. “Very well. Eloise has already agreed to accompany me, so your presence isn’t required. It was only desired.” Amy reached down to squeeze Jane’s hand before she waltzed back out the door.

Jane had barely found the page on which she’d ended when another knock sounded. “Come in.”

This time a footman stood in the doorway. “I’m to tell ye that Brennan Andrews is in the foyer and asks if ye’d come have a word with him.”

Jane stood up so quickly from her chair that she nearly sent it over backward. “Certainly,” she managed, setting aside the book and just barely resisting the urge to look at her reflection in her dressing mirror. He’d seen her this morning, for heaven’s sake, and she wasn’t some jewel that needed to be constantly polished.

With the footman leading the way, she kept to a civilized walk down the hallway and descended the stairs. Her heart thumped like a racketing drum, but she did her best to ignore that. Then she spied Brennan, his gaze on a note in his hands, and her heart stopped beating altogether for what felt like a solid minute. In his dark brown coat, a plaid scarf that matched his kilt around his neck and down one shoulder, and heavy boots on his feet, he looked simply delectable.

There were no two ways about it. Whatever he thought of her staring and stammering, she liked him. Very much. And she wanted more kisses, more private conversations, more ... everything. Oh, this was all going to be such a disaster, and even knowing that she still walked up to him with a smile on her face. “Good afternoon, Brennan.”

Chapter Five

Brennan faced her and then forgot what he'd been about to say, which was idiotic, because he'd been rehearsing for an hour. "Jane."

"Did I leave something behind when Lady Glendarril and I called on you?"

Well, that was a better excuse than the one he'd made up. "Aye." Trying to stifle a scowl, he dug into his pockets, finding only some coins and some folded notes. He pulled out one of the papers. "The notes ye took for the viscountess," he decided, handing the page to her.

Jane looked down at it, her attractive mouth twitching. "Ah, yes. Thank you."

While Pogan stood to one side looking increasingly curious, Brennan shifted. "Would ye care to come see the village with me? Unless ye've been down there already. Or ye have someaught to see to."

Saint Andrew and the heavenly choir. He'd known how to be bold and flirtatious and romantic once; he'd found a wife, after all, and a lovely, lively one, at that. But he hadn't felt this ... tightness in his chest for seven years, and he hadn't had to be charming for better than eleven. If he'd described himself today, "bold" wasn't a word he would use, any longer. "Cautious" fit him better. Or "wary." And perhaps a wee bit broken.

"It was just a thought," he went on, reaching behind him for the front door. "I'll be back here for dinner tomorrow, so ye

dunnae—”

“Will you give me a moment to fetch a wrap?” she interrupted, already turning up the stairs.

“Aye. Of course.”

Well. She hadn’t laughed at him, anyway. Brennan took a quick breath. For God’s sake, he was a bloody Highlander. He saw something he wanted, and he took it. That would likely send her fleeing in terror, though, so mayhap patience and a light touch would serve him better. It suited him better, these days.

“Temperance said she liked yer drawings,” Coll drawled from down the hallway.

“Aye? Nae one perfect one, but I think with all three I may have found enough of what she wants to go forward.”

“When will ye have the final drawing?”

“I’ll have it to ye by Hogmanay. We cannae begin building until spring, so dunnae be in such a damned hurry, giant.” Aside from that, he hadn’t done a thing but half tear apart his own library and sketch Jane for the third time since she and the viscountess had left his house.

“If we’re nae in a damned hurry, what are ye doing here already?”

“I thought Miss Bansil would like a walk through the village without having to worry over having everyone buzzing about like bees at seeing the MacTaggart brides.”

His cousin nodded. “She’s a shy one, Jane is. But I dunnae expect ye’ll have any more luck than the lasses in convincing her to leave the house, so—”

“I’m ready,” Jane said, trotting down the stairs again.

She’d donned a heavy blue coat that looked too big for her, but at least it would keep her warm. These ladies from England didn’t seem to like the Scottish winter very much. Uncle Angus had said on at least a thousand occasions that Sassenach lasses were more delicate than hothouse flowers,

but the ones the MacTaggart brothers had found seemed fairly capable.

“Do ye fancy a walk, or should I have Gavin bring the coach around?”

“I think a walk would be splendid,” she returned, pulling on her bonnet and tying the blue ribbon beneath her chin with swift, confident fingers.

Ignoring Coll’s skeptical look, Brennan pulled his own gloves back on and offered Jane his arm. When she gripped his coat sleeve, he was certain he could feel her warmth running all the way from his wrist and down his spine.

They set out from the house, descending the hill and keeping to one side of the hard, icy road. She’d worn her walking shoes, but he kept her arm pinned against his side in case she lost her footing. “Is there a particular place ye wish to see, or will ye let me give ye a tour?”

“Give me your tour, if you please,” she returned promptly. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“Actually,” he said, turning his head to view her with his good eye, “I was wondering if I needed to apologize to ye.”

The cold-touch pink of her cheeks deepened to red. “For kissing me, you mean? Heavens, no. I should apologize to you. I ... You’re a handsome man, and I’m afraid I kept staring at you. I’m just ... I’m not very polished, and so—”

“I’m nae so polished, myself,” he cut in, the meaning of her words just beginning to sink in. She liked him, and she thought she’d been what, too forward? “I should have asked yer permission before I kissed ye. If ye dunnae want me doing it again, tell me so and I’ll do my utmost, though I cannae guarantee that I’ll keep from staring right back at ye.”

She stumbled a little, and he gripped her tighter until she found her feet again. “I don’t understand,” she muttered.

“What dunnae ye understand, lass? Ye’ve a wit to ye, and the prettiest brown eyes, and I wanted to kiss ye. I should’ve asked ye first, but I didnae want Lady Glendarril thinking either of us was being improper, so I risked it.”

“You didn’t think I was acting like a hoyden?”

He’d seen nuns who acted less reserved than she did. “Nae. Jane, ye’re a fine, fair lass. When I saw ye in the library at Aldriss, ye caught my attention in a way nae other lass has caught it in ... years. I’d like to know if that doesnae sit well with ye.”

They walked at least half a mile in silence. Coll had called her shy, and Brennan had certainly seen evidence of that, himself, but he hoped she could muster something to say. He couldn’t—and he wouldn’t—continue his pursuit if it was one-sided.

“Lady Glendarril has asked me to travel with her and Lord Glendarril to the Continent right after Hogmanay,” she said abruptly, her words fogging the air. “If I don’t wish to go, then she’s offered to find me employment elsewhere.”

For a moment he felt like he’d been punched in the chest. “Ye’re nae even to stay the winter, then?” For God’s sake, how could he figure this—her—out if she was to leave in less than a fortnight?

“I suppose not. It ... I could remain in the countess’s employ, of course, but everyone, including me, knows she doesn’t need me here. I detest not being necessary.” She shook herself. “But that’s not why we’re here, is it? You’re showing me the village.”

“Aye.” If she left the MacTaggerts, he’d never see her again. He knew that for a certainty. And that didn’t sit well with him. At all. “Aye,” he repeated. “Most visitors, nae that we have that many,” he forced himself to continue, as they crossed a short bridge into the village proper, “come into Pethiloch this way, over the bridge. An old Laird Aldriss had it built because in the spring the water’s just deep enough to wet a lass’s skirts when she’s sitting in a wagon to drive across the stream and his lady didnae like walking about with wet hems.”

“Does the stream have a name?”

She didn’t want to speak about her employment, clearly, but neither had she responded to his declaration that he liked her.

A fairly weak declaration it was, he supposed, but then he'd only known her for three days. "Aye. The *Duilich Sruth*. It means 'annoying stream.'"

Her mouth quirked. "You're bamming me."

"I amnae. That's what the lady called it, and the name stuck. But as I said, most visitors come this way, which is why the stable's on one side of the street, and the Round Cow tavern is on the other. A place to put yer animal, and a place for a cheap mug and some warmth."

"It's pretty. Pithiloch is, I mean."

"Aye. It's been well kept-up, mostly thanks to Laird Aldriss and his generous funds." When she lifted an eyebrow, he nodded. "And aye, everyone about kens where the money truly comes from, though the idea of being beholden to an Englishwoman doesnae sit well with most of 'em. We all pretend we dunnae know that Lady Aldriss funds everything."

"Is that why she claims to be disliked here?"

"Partly. Mostly it's because she left the Highlands."

"She's said she found it lonely."

Brennan nodded, still somewhat surprised at how very easy it was to chat with Jane Bansil, even if she seldom spoke about what she might truly be thinking. "Uncle Angus's idea of entertaining is to go down to the Round Cow and buy a round of drinks. He's nae one for proper soirees or dinners."

"And for Lady Aldriss, proper soirees and dinners are some of her favorite things in the world."

She shuddered as she spoke. "Ye're nae fond of such things, I take it?" he asked.

"I never know what to say, and standing about alone while everyone else is chatting is ... humiliating."

"Ye just need to find someone who'll stand there with ye," he returned. "This is the bakery. Mrs. Wass makes a fine Tain cheddar bread that'll make yer peepers roll back in yer head, and Mr. Wass makes shortbread biscuits that ye'll dream about after but one taste."

Pushing open the door, he stepped aside to let her enter the bakery. She stopped in the middle of the entry, one hand on the door. “It sits well with me,” she said in a rush, and walked forward again.

Heat stirred deep in his chest. “What sits well with ye?” he asked slowly, moving around in front of her to keep her from retreating farther. “Ye tell me. I want to hear the words.”

Her bosom rose and fell with her quick succession of breaths, but he wasn’t going to relent. This was important. Damned important. He’d moved beyond the age of fooling about, but if this was simply her first taste of flirtation and she had no intention of allowing anything more than that, he needed to know.

“Oh dear,” she muttered almost soundlessly. “You liking me sits well with me. And I enjoyed the kisses. I don’t know what it all means, but I liked it. I like it.”

“I’m nae certain what it all means, either,” he returned in the same tone, “but I like it, as well.”

Perhaps that wasn’t entirely true, because while he did have an idea what he wanted, at the same time he’d become ... not quite comfortable with his life, but accustomed to it. Before he risked that and risked himself, he wanted to know her better.

“What do we do, then?” she asked, her mind clearly traveling along the same road as his.

“First,” he said, pulling out a chair from one of the quartet of small tables at the front of the bakery and motioning her to sit, “we have a bit of Tain cheddar bread and a hot cider. And then we chat.”

Whether it was the comfortable, quiet setting or the dash of whisky Mr. Wass always added to the cider “for flavor,” over the next hour Brennan and Jane ate nearly an entire loaf of bread and he learned all about her life before she’d come to be in the employ of Lady Aldriss. For God’s sake, the lass had never had an easy moment. And while her cousin Amy had been kind enough to her, the new Mrs. Niall MacTaggart had

also been too young for most of their acquaintance to do anything about improving Jane's situation.

"Ye stood up to Niall and made him alter his plans," he said aloud, taking another swallow of cider. "That's nae an easy thing, Jane."

"I don't want to sound overly romantic or sentimental," she returned, "but he and Amy were so perfect for each other that the way he kept trying to take such careful steps not to upset her began to annoy me, honestly. I mean, if you're going to be in love, then *be in love*."

Brennan sliced off another piece of bread and handed it to her. "Aye. There comes a time when everyone around ye can see what's afoot, and if ye cannae, then it's up to someone else to set ye straight. Or at least give ye a kick in the arse."

Her quick grin flashed. "I knew as soon as I opened my mouth that my aunt would sack me, but even if Lady Aldriss hadn't offered me a roof and a bed beneath it, telling Amy to make a blasted decision still would have been worth it."

Deliberately he brushed her fingers as she reached for the butter. "Have ye nae been in love yerself, then, Jane?"

Color tinged her cheeks again. "No. I mean I've seen a man or two I thought handsome, but by now I'm practically an antique."

"I dunnae know about that. Yer mouth is soft and sweet enough."

"Brennan, please." She ducked her head as if trying to hide.

"Should I stop? Does that embarrass ye?"

"I'm not embarrassed," she retorted, lifting her chin again. "I don't like to be teased."

He leaned closer across the table, pushing aside the remains of the bread. "I am nae teasing ye, Jane Bansil. Ye heat me up inside, in a way I've nae felt for some time. I also ken that I'm a novelty to ye. I cannae begin to guess how many of the Sassenach lads must be blind nae to have seen ye, but I'm here now, and *I* see ye." Slowly he took her fingers in his. "I like

what I see. I dunnae want ye going back to London to sit with some other wealthy lass.”

Keeping his gaze, she picked up her cider and drained it. “I’m sorry,” she rasped, “but that doesn’t make any sense. I’m ... dull.”

How many people had told her that during her life? he wondered. Enough to make her believe it, clearly. “We cannae all be the sort who kidnaps a lass and sweeps her off to Gretna Green, I reckon. That’s a sweet fairy tale, but nae all gestures need to be so grand.” He took her hand again, ignoring the faint cluck of interest from Mrs. Wass at the back of the shop. “Ye’re nae dull. Ye’re cautious. As am I.”

“Can a person be so cautious she misses her chance to be in a fairy tale?” she asked after a moment, the sadness that made him want to wrap her in his arms touching her eyes again.

“Nae. I’ve nae ever heard of such a thing.” Brennan smiled. “I’ll tell ye what. Ye’ve seen the MacTaggart dinners. Every soul sits wherever they choose. I’ll plant myself somewhere in the middle tomorrow night. Ye come sit beside me, Jane. That’s precisely how bold ye need to be.”

Perhaps it was his own pride talking, but he wanted her to approach him. He wanted to know that he hadn’t simply found a woman who didn’t know about his past and therefore looked at him with more interest than pity, and that he was in the process of falling for her for no other damned reason than that. And he needed to know soon, because unlike his cousins, he couldn’t afford to hie down to London for weeks and weeks in order to woo a lass who was aiming for nothing but a quiet, uncomplicated life.

Now, though, she would likely fret for the next day and a half over whether she had enough courage to sit beside him or not. Brennan pushed back his chair. He didn’t mean to torture her, for God’s sake. “I’ve still a good half the village to show ye. Do ye feel fortified enough to venture out in the cold with me again?”

“Yes. I actually feel quite warm.” Standing, she took his proffered arm, and they stepped back outside into the cold

Highlands winter.

Things like this simply didn't happen to women like her. That sentence kept beating about in her skull, bashing against the secret thoughts that perhaps Brennan Andrews truly did like her enough to wish to ... court her, and that "Jane Andrews" had a rather nice ring to it.

That was indulging in daydreams again, though, and she certainly knew better than to do that. Especially when she had a decision about her employment to make, and very soon. At the same time, there they were, the two of them, currently walking past a small dress shop with frost on the windows and snow plopped artistically atop the sign reading: MILLY'S FINERY FOR LASSES.

"Is this cold for the Highlands?" she asked, mainly because she felt like she'd been silent for hours.

"It's a bit balmy today, actually," Brennan returned. "In late January the true cold comes. Some of us even put aside our kilts for trousers then."

"So, it gets too cold for even a Scotsman's knees," she quipped, waiting for him to grin and then unable to keep her own mouth from curving in response. He appreciated her humor, and that all by itself was rather intoxicating.

"That it does. I meant to ask ye, are ye going to join the rest of the family at church on Christmas Day?"

"I expect I will. It still seems odd, to not have the family opening gifts or singing carols."

"Just wait another week. We make up for it then." He pointed out yet another tavern, then continued up the road toward the small dock where a handful of fishing boats had been tied. "Well, that's near the end of Pethiloch. What do ye think of our village?"

"It's pretty. And everyone has seemed very friendly," she offered, doubly grateful that it had been him showing her

about alone rather than with one of the MacTaggart brides. They'd bypassed going into the jewelry store simply because of the crowd standing about there, all of them talking about how fine it was to see young Eloise back where she belonged, and how lovely Amy was and whether she'd give Niall a strong Highlands son.

"We have a lending library as well, or that's what my house has become, anyway."

"That's good. I had you figured for the village scholar."

Turning away, his profile folded into a brief grimace before he faced her again. *Oh dear*. She'd missed something important—or, worse, insulted him—and now he was probably wondering how in the world he could escape her company without offending her.

"I have a few books I've brought with me that I could give for your collection," she added. "I'd be happy to share them with other readers."

"That's very generous of ye. Thank ye."

They continued along the wooden dock, toward the open loch beyond. A handful of children scrambled about on the ice near the shore, their excited shrieking both at odds with and complementary to the picturesque scene around them.

"What I mean to say is, do ye like it here?" Brennan burst out. "Is it a place ye'd nae mind seeing fairly often, or will these few weeks be enough to give ye yer fill of the Highlands? Could ye leave and nae look back and be satisfied?"

Good heavens. He wanted to know if she would mind *living* there. If she would be willing to tolerate weather cold enough to drive a Scotsman to wear trousers. Most important, he wanted to know if she wished to live there *with him*. A fourth choice. One she'd never expected and had no idea how to react to.

Her knees felt abruptly wobbly, and she grabbed onto a post with her free hand. It wasn't a request for her hand in

marriage, but she didn't think she was too far off in believing it to be the lead-up to one. *Her*:

"Whoa. Steady, lass," he said, shifting to cup a hand beneath her elbow. "I've kept ye out in this weather for too long. Let me see ye home." He waved a hand at a passing cart, and the hay-laden wagon rolled to a stop. "Sòlas! Give us a ride up to Aldriss, will ye?"

"Aye, Brennan," the driver replied, tipping his cap as they reached the near wheel. "It's warmer behind the hay than up here."

"Thank ye." They moved around to the rear of the cart, and then Brennan slid his hands around her waist and lifted her onto the back end.

It made her breathless and he released her far too quickly, but she preferred that he think her chilled rather than cowardly. Aside from that, when he hopped up beside her Brennan put an arm around her shoulders and tucked her up against his side. Oh, this—*this*—was something to which she could become accustomed. The fact that they had a logical reason for her to be in his arms didn't hurt, either.

"I'm sorry, lass," he murmured as they bumped along the road. "I wanted to spend the afternoon with ye. I didnae think how cold it must be for ye. Och, I'm an idiot."

"No, you're not. Don't even think such a thing." That came out more forcefully than she meant, so Jane shivered a little for good measure. "I had fun today. And I enjoyed the company."

"As did I." He paused. "If I've overset ye, then I apologize. If ... Well, perhaps we'd best keep to a walk. Nae sense rushing into anything. I dunnae like the idea of ye leaving my life, is all. That's for me to manage, I suppose. Ye dunnae need another burden."

That last bit stopped her heart. She knew perfectly well what he meant—that he'd begun to realize she was far too timid and reserved, and that he might have made a mistake with his initial attraction.

She *was* timid. She *was* reserved. As they reached the front drive of Aldriss Park, she allowed him to help her down from the wagon and walk her to the door, and then she fled inside, up the stairs, and into her bedchamber. Slamming the door felt a bit satisfying, but it didn't solve the true problem—which seemed to be her.

Brennan Andrews liked her. She hadn't gone out of her way to dress provocatively or flirt outrageously. In fact, she'd done nothing but be herself, and he liked her for it. Taken by itself, that didn't sound so terrible.

She liked him, as well. She liked that he was thoughtful and had an understated sense of humor, that his office had stacks of books and papers strewn across every surface, that he spoke to her like someone his equal. He wasn't some idle, rich aristocrat, and he wasn't some larger-than-life heroic, brawny Highlander who flung villains into the loch or rescued kittens from burning buildings. He was a man. A man who'd been hurt, physically and emotionally, and who stood tall despite that.

Jane crossed the room, put her hands on her hips, and glared at her reflection in the dressing mirror. Rail straight, black hair pulled tight with not a strand out of place, a simple, high-necked gown with long sleeves, and not a bit of makeup on her face. That was indeed her. But at the same time, it wasn't entirely accurate, any longer. She felt warmer inside, and perhaps an inch bolder. And more than anything else, she felt like she was getting in her own way.

Did she want to remain Lady Aldriss's unneeded companion? Did she wish to sit and knit or embroider and chat about nothing in particular with some woman who paid her, go to dress fittings and evenings at the theater and soirees and dinners because a lady shouldn't attend such things alone? Be a ... a warm body who could help someone else fulfill her obligations to Society?

It would be easier, certainly. All she had to do was nothing more than she already did on a daily basis. She'd already demonstrated to the one man who'd ever shown an interest in her that she was cow-hearted, and as a result he'd already

begun to back away. She could decline to sit beside him at Christmas Eve dinner and finish this without having to utter a word. Nothing would change. Ever. Only the setting. Not the circumstances.

Jane turned her back on herself. She wasn't very good company, after all. As she caught sight of her small writing desk, though, she walked over to it and opened the lid. Inside lay the sketch Brennan had made for her of her perfect library. Picking it up, she examined it again. Shelves and shelves of books, sliding ladders to enable her to reach the higher stacks, comfortable chairs beneath the window ... and there to one side, half hidden by a globe and a flower vase, a man's legs.

She looked closer. The legs had boots on and were crossed at the ankles. Someone else sitting in her perfect library. Bare knees, and the edge of a kilt. *Him*. Brennan had put himself in her library, presumably sitting in another comfortable chair and reading.

Jane took a quick breath. This vision wasn't so very different from her perfect future. He'd only added one thing. An important thing. And she liked seeing it that way. The only hitch was that it would take courage on her part to make it happen. To leave behind everything she knew and step into the unknown. Did she have that much courage?

Chapter Six

Amy and Eloise hadn't yet returned from the village. That left Lady Aldriss, Lady Glendarril, and Miranda MacTaggart at Aldriss Park this afternoon. Three brilliant, vibrant women with whom Jane had almost nothing in common except for her sex.

Taking a breath, not quite certain which of them she least wanted to encounter first, Jane left her bedchamber and went wandering down the hallways, peeking into open doorways and still half trying to convince herself that if she didn't run across anyone that would be a sign that nothing was meant to change, after all.

“—not saying you're being cowardly,” Miranda's voice came from the upstairs sitting room. “I'm only asking why the MacTaggerts were willing to defy the kilt ban and the bagpipe ban on more than one occasion—and that's according to your own tales—but declined to celebrate Christmas.”

Jane leaned into the doorway. Miranda and Aden stood close by the fireplace, their attention on a painting of a very formidable and very long-bearded man who wore a kilt and had a deer carcass slung over one shoulder, a musket in his free hand.

“I cannae answer that,” Aden returned. “I reckon we stopped celebrating it during Cromwell's initial ban, and then when the laws changed for everyone but Scotland we'd already gotten out of the habit of it.”

“Christmas is too civilized, anyway,” Lord Glendarril's voice took up, and Jane spied him sitting beside Temperance at

the other end of the room. “Praying and cooing over a bairn. Hogmanay has whisky and fire to it. Now *that’s* a celebration.”

“The number of times you three have discussed fire and Hogmanay is beginning to concern me,” Miranda stated, amusement in her voice. “The ... Jane? Come in, my dear.”

Blast it. Squaring her shoulders, Jane walked into the room. “Good afternoon,” she said, giving a curtsy.

“Did you need something?” Miranda pursued with her easy smile. “Not that you have to need something. I—Lady Aldriss said you had the day to yourself, is all. And now I sound like a lunatic. May I offer you a cup of tea?”

She could say yes. Or she could claim to be looking for the countess. It wasn’t too late to change her mind. Jane put her hands behind her back, clenching them hard together. “I was wondering if someone might have a gown I could borrow for Christmas Eve dinner. Something pretty. Prettier than what I generally wear, I mean.”

The four of them stared at her, while she wished she could sink into the floor. It was just a request for a gown, for heaven’s sake, but even she couldn’t remember the last time she’d voiced the urge to wear something pretty.

“Of course we can assist you,” Temperance put in belatedly. “Is there any reason in particular you ... No, never mind. I am in no position to question anyone’s motives.”

“I’d like to know,” Coll said over that, and his new wife punched him in the chest. “Damn it, woman.”

“Aden and Coll need to go play billiards or axe throwing right now, as it happens,” Miranda took up, squeezing her husband’s hand and then shoving him toward the door.

“Well, I vote for axe throwing.” Aden cocked his head at his older brother, and the two men skirted past Jane and out to the hallway beyond.

Moving swiftly, Temperance shut the door behind them and locked it. “Now. Tell us how you wish to appear,” she said, wrapping her hands around Jane’s left arm and pulling her toward the couch.

“Just ... pretty. Less plain,” Jane stumbled, her cheeks heating. Both of these ladies were younger than she was, but it was at moments like this, when she realized how much experience she lacked in certain areas, that she felt like a very silly child.

“Does this have anything to do with Mr. Andrews?” Lady Glendarril asked, sitting and pulling Jane down beside her.

Oh, heavens. They knew? “I—Who?”

“Oh, please. I was there this morning, you know.”

Miranda sat on Jane’s other side. “Brennan Andrews? Aden’s cousin? Oh, tell me, Persie. What happened this morning?”

“Nothing, except the two of them kept gazing at each other and forgetting to speak. There were a few moments I thought I should excuse myself so they could stare uninterrupted.”

“That is not true!” Jane burst out. “I was sitting behind you, anyway, so you couldn’t have seen me staring at him.”

“Ha! You *were* staring, then. I thought so, and he certainly wasn’t spending his time looking at me. It was actually rather disconcerting; I’m accustomed to men staring at me, you know.”

Yes, that sort of thing did happen to famous actresses, Jane imagined, and Temperance, back when she’d been Persephone Jones, had been among the most famous in England. “He wasn’t staring, either,” she said anyway.

“If you say so. But it is about him, yes?”

“It’s Christmas Eve. I’d like to look nice for it.”

Beside her, Miranda sighed. “Of course. And there needn’t be anything more to it than that.”

If she’d answered any other way, Jane wouldn’t have said anything more. But these MacTaggerts, born or married to Highlanders, were kind people, and not one of them had ever given her the impression that her presence was less than welcome among them.

“Thank you,” she said aloud. “And Brennan Andrews is a very fine-looking man.”

“I knew it!” Temperance whispered gleefully, squeezing Jane’s arm. “With everyone to whom we’ve tried to introduce you over the past months, you mean to say it’s a Highlander who’s caught your attention?”

“I don’t ... Yes, he has caught my attention. I don’t know whether I’ve caught his—though he says I have—or whether he simply feels sympathy for a bookish woman past her prime.”

“You are not past anything,” Miranda stated.

“Come with us,” Temperance took up. “I have some fabulous gowns, and my Flora had me looking splendid for years. We’ll have you looking like a queen, Jane. It won’t be sympathy he’s feeling toward you.”

A flutter of nerves ran down Jane’s hands. “A duchess would be acceptable,” she said, allowing the unsettled smile she felt to appear on her face. “I don’t wish to kill him, after all.”

Miranda laughed. “Well. Nothing less than a duchess, then. Come, come!”

Brennan shed his coat as he entered Aldriss Park, shaking the light fall of snow off his shoulders and stomping the white stuff off his shoes. During the years when there had been no lasses at the manor house, Christmas Eve had been like any other winter night. This was the first time in years that he could recall the day, the evening, feeling special. And looking special.

It might have been the holly bows draped over the mantels, or the artistic stacks of pomegranates on the tables scattered amid sugared cakes and biscuits, and the clove-addled oranges that had the house smelling, well, festive. Of course, it was the influence of the Sassenach lasses, and while strictly speaking it could see them all jailed, he rather approved.

Pogan, though, looked dour as he finished shaking out Brennan's coat and hung it over a peg in the foyer. "Look at all this daintiness," the butler muttered. "Lace and sentiment, and bound to make trouble for us all."

"If the law should come by, ye tell 'em that this is the Sassenachs celebrating a Sassenach holiday and the rest of us have nae part in it," Brennan suggested.

The butler brightened a little. "Aye, that'll do, I reckon. I dunnae mind it, truly, as long as they dunnae think we mean to bypass Hogmanay now."

"They wouldnae dare."

"I hope ye've the right of it, Mr. Andrews. The family's mostly gathered in the drawing room. I'll be opening the dining room doors in but a minute."

Grinning, Brennan nodded and made his way down the hall to the drawing room. However much things had changed over the past few months, he was glad to see his cousins back home. The estate needed their care and attention, and as well-liked as Laird Aldriss was, it was the three brothers who kept the land and its inhabitants—both human and animal—as well-maintained as they were.

Niall greeted him with a slap to the back as soon as he entered the room, and almost immediately he found himself in the middle of an argument over whether there was a difference between acknowledging a holiday and celebrating it. Father Gormal Taggert and old Mrs. Gilanders and her daughter Maeve had been invited as well, as was the MacTaggerts' habit for villagers who had no other family in the area. Aye, he was one of those as well, even if he hadn't been their nearest relative.

As he looked about, taking the glass of whisky someone offered him, he couldn't help noticing one absence in particular. He'd half thought Jane might decline to sit beside him tonight, that she might have taken the ensuing day to decide either that she didn't like him as much as he'd hoped or that going on as she had been with her life was simply easier.

Since he'd first spoken to her, he'd wondered if she was more relieved or more resigned that life had passed her by, and he might have just gotten his answer. It wasn't the one he'd wanted, but he hadn't asked much of her tonight. If she couldn't even screw up her courage enough to make an appearance, then he needed to know.

"What's amiss, Brennan?" his uncle Angus, Laird Aldriss, asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Brennan mentally shook himself. "Nae a thing. I'm just trying to get accustomed to seeing a bit of sparkle and elegance in the house."

The earl laughed. "Aye, it's odd, isnae? Ye should've seen Francesca's house in London—fresh flowers and lace on every tabletop. It was enough to make a lad shiver. But I have to say, it's nae unpleasant here."

"It isnae," Brennan agreed.

"I wanted to thank ye again for keeping an old man company while my boys were dragged down to London." Glancing past Brennan, Lord Aldriss cleared his throat. "If nae for yer attention, I'd nae have recovered from my deathbed, I'm certain."

Brennan turned around to see Lady Aldriss eyeing the two of them, one eyebrow lifted. "My lady," he said, bowing. "We've missed yer refined touch here."

"You were only sixteen years old when I last was here, yes?" she returned with a cool smile. "I doubt you appreciated my fine touch back then."

Snorting, he inclined his head. "Mayhap I didnae. But I did miss it after ye left. The house, as ye nae doubt saw when ye arrived, has gone a wee bit rough."

"I did see that." Tilting her head, she put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry about your wife. I hope my sons and my husband gave you the support you needed, and I regret that I wasn't here to do so. Or even to meet her."

"That's kind of ye to say. Eithne did from time to time attempt to bring a bit of softness up here, outnumbered though

she was.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I shall see that her efforts weren’t in vain.”

“Thank ye, my lady.”

“Aunt Francesca,” she corrected.

“Aunt Francesca, then.”

The double doors dividing the drawing room from the dining room swung open. “Dinner is served,” Pogan announced, his chest puffed out, before he stepped to one side.

They’d put the two additional leaves into the long dining room table, extending it to its greatest length, and the size by which his family had grown over the past six months truly hit him. With the addition of cousin Eloise, even the number of MacTaggerts-by-blood had increased by one. The dining room felt full to bursting, even if he might have privately wished there had been one more person there.

Miranda MacTaggert sat beside him on one side and Lady Glendarril on the other. Brennan nodded, putting a smile on his face. Behind that, though, he felt as if he’d nearly touched the sun only to go outside, arm outstretched, and find it raining. He’d missed that damned feeling of breathlessness, of anticipation at the mere sight of someone, and now he’d lost it again.

Pogan made an odd sound from the doorway, and Brennan looked up. And his heart stopped beating.

She’d dressed in scarlet. A gown of deep red, silver beading about the bodice and the skirt, and silver lace at the half sleeves and the low-cut neckline, a black ribbon about her waist and emphasizing her slender figure. Jane’s hair was upswept, not in a tight bun as usual, but with a cascade of soft waves interwoven with scarlet and silver ribbon flowing about her shoulders.

“Good ... bloody God,” Coll muttered from beyond Temperance.

Brennan stood. That was what one did when a lady entered the room, and Jane Bansil looked every inch a lady. A seductive, lovely, regal lady. With an almost comical abruptness, the rest of the men present followed his lead.

Her color high, her chin lifted a little, Jane swished gracefully around the table and came to a stop behind Miranda. “Might I trouble you to trade seats?” she asked, her voice not entirely steady.

“Certainly,” Miranda said easily, rising and moving over to sit at the empty place on the far side of Aden. Her husband lifted an eyebrow at her, but she only gave him a level glance.

None of the lasses seemed to be surprised, Brennan realized. Even Lady Aldriss ignored the goings-on, simply gesturing for Pogan to bring out the first course from the kitchen. That meant several things, but when he turned his head to gaze at Jane he forgot what most of them were.

“Ye look like fire, lass,” he said in a low voice, noting offhandedly that the conversation in the room hadn’t quite returned to its previous cacophony.

“It’s a bit much, I think,” she returned in the same tone, “but I wanted to make a statement.”

“That ye’ve done. I ... I thought mayhap ye’d decided nae to join us tonight.” A black strand of her hair strayed below one ear, and his fingers twitched as he imagined brushing it back into place.

“Half of me still doesn’t quite trust that you could actually be interested in me,” Jane whispered, fiddling with one of the trio of forks in front of her. “And then I asked myself which would hurt more: not knowing if I might have missed finding something important, or finding something and then being wrong about it. I decided not knowing would be worse. So here I am.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “Then we should figure out what we’ve found,” he murmured. As far as he was concerned he already knew, but she’d taken a huge step toward him, and he had nothing against giving her a bit of time to

come to the same realization. While he did everything in his power to convince her, of course, before her deadline came to leave the Highlands.

“I would like that, Brennan.”

Lady Aldriss stood, a glass of wine in one hand. “I know it is illegal, but I should nevertheless like to wish everyone a happy Christmas,” she said, lifting the glass.

“Happy Christmas,” everyone echoed, lifting their own glasses.

He didn’t even remember what he ate. It had been satisfying and tasted well enough, but every bit of sinew and bone in his body felt attuned to the woman seated beside him. She was no simpering debutante, no bairn of a lass without an idea about what tragedies life could bring with it; whether she’d ever been in love or not, she’d certainly experienced hardship and pain and loneliness. And he wanted to see to it that none of those things ever dared touch her again.

“Ye’re staying in the green room, aye?” he asked as they finished what seemed like the meal’s fiftieth course.

“I am. It has a lovely view of the loch.”

“I recall.” He leaned a breath closer, scenting the lavender in her hair. “I dunnae wish to frighten ye, lass, but I’ve a mind to visit ye in the green room tonight. What do ye say to that?”

Her fork clattered onto her plate. “I’m sorry,” she said, retrieving it, her cheeks pinking again. “Too much wine, I think.”

Eloise across the table chuckled. “I’m going to fall asleep sitting right here.”

Jane took another bite, chewed, and swallowed. “Evidently I’m not as composed as I pretend,” she muttered.

“Neither am I, Jane.”

“Come call on me, then. I ... Just promise me you’re not playing about. I am too old to face what would follow being ruined.”

“Ye and I are the same age, Jane, and I dunnae think it’s so old. But I’m nae playing about. I am past wasting time. And I do mean to call on ye tonight.”

He meant to call on her. In her bedchamber. The words batted around in Jane’s mind for the rest of the evening. She was certain her generally reserved conversation was completely incomprehensible, though everyone made certain to at least walk by and compliment her appearance, because all she could think about was the man seated halfway across the drawing room.

She could admit to herself that she’d entertained carnal thoughts about him since they’d first met, and that she hadn’t really done that before. Yes, in passing she’d thought so-and-so handsome or wondered what it would be like to be in a different so-and-so’s arms for a night, but nothing as intense as this. And certainly nothing as likely to be realized as this.

“Jane, did it work?” Amy asked, sitting close beside her and capturing one of Jane’s hands in both of hers. “Did you catch his attention?”

“It wasn’t about that as much as it was about deciding, I suppose, who I want to be for the rest of my life,” Jane returned. “And I would like to be someone who, on occasion, wears red.”

“You look splendid in it,” her cousin commented, glancing over at Brennan. “He likes you, then, does he?”

“Yes, I think he does. At any rate, he noticed me—which is something unusual in itself.”

“Jane, you shouldn’t say such things.”

Jane smiled. “My dear cousin, I have spent much of my life trying to be noticed as little as possible. Surely you haven’t noticed me well before now.”

Amy chuckled at that. “There were times when I wished I had your talent for it. Especially where Mother was

concerned.” She lifted Jane’s hand and kissed her palm. “You are to tell me if something goes amiss, or if you have any doubts or fears at all. I perhaps didn’t appreciate you as much as I should have, but I do love you, Jane.”

She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had told her that. “Thank you, Amy. Brennan doesn’t frighten me. He makes me…” Jane thought about it for a moment. “He makes me feel happy.” Happy and extremely nervous about later that night, but happy nonetheless. Unless she did something stupid and put him off her completely.

“Happy is a very good thing.”

Amy might be her junior by some fifteen years, but her cousin did have some knowledge that Jane simply didn’t possess. Asking advice might be helpful, but she couldn’t do it. If something went awry, if she ended up alone again, she didn’t want *anyone* knowing just how far she’d gone in abandoning propriety. How far she’d gone in following her heart, of all things.

“Am I to assume you won’t be joining Angus and me on the Continent?” Lady Aldriss murmured from behind her as Niall pulled Amy away.

“I—I am so grateful for the opportunity, my lady,” Jane said, turning to face her employer. “You’ve been so very kind, and I—”

“When you first knocked on the door of Oswell House to inform me that Niall and Amy had eloped and that he’d offered you a roof over your head, I had some misgivings,” the countess broke in. “A companion needs to be loyal above all else, after all.”

“I understand. Th—”

“Then I realized that you were being loyal—to Amy. You did something that allowed her the greatest happiness, and you suffered for it without complaint. Beyond that, Jane, I enjoy your company. When you bother to speak, you are quite clever.” The countess reached out and took her hand. “I did

and do wish you to be happy. And I will still provide you a letter of recommendation, should you ever require one.”

Jane took a deep breath. “I think—I hope—I have found a position where I am both welcome and necessary,” she whispered. “Of course, I may also have completely misread the situation, and I will be knocking on your door come next week.”

Francesca Oswell-MacTaggert smiled. “I watched MacTaggert men fall for their lasses all Season, my dear. I do recognize the look.”

Well, that was heartening. Exceedingly so. Jane sent her soon-to-be-former employer a small smile in return. “If I may say so, my lady, I hope that your successful efforts on the behalf of your family also signify a hope for you, personally.”

The countess’s cheeks darkened just a little. “Just when I thought I was beyond being touched by fancy again, it appears I’m being delivered the lesson that one is never too old or too dignified for Cupid’s arrows. And such things cannot and should not be ignored, Jane. By anyone.”

With all of her heart, Jane hoped the countess was correct about that. She didn’t make a habit of upending her life, and tonight would be the second time this year that she’d done so. She glanced in Brennan’s direction, to find his one-eyed gaze on her. Just one fairy tale come true wasn’t too much to ask, was it? Just this one.

Chapter Seven

The evening seemed to drag on for at least a month, until finally friends left the house and family began separating for the night. When Jane looked over at Brennan's chair again he was gone, though she had no idea when he'd left the room or whether he'd left the house entirely and meant to climb in through her window as Niall had done while pursuing Amy. Oh dear, they hadn't planned this very well. Perhaps she should leave her window unlatched, just in case.

As she bade Lady Aldriss good evening and offered to make certain the countess was awake by eight o'clock so she could attend the Christmas morning church service with her husband and the rest of the family, Jane scurried up the stairs to her bedchamber.

She closed her door, leaning back against it for a moment. So she was unemployed, now. Or she would be, when the countess and the earl left the Highlands without her. Even that, though, didn't unsettle her as much as the idea that Brennan would be calling on her. Since she had no idea from where he meant to make his appearance, she decided she'd best leave both the door and all the windows unlocked. After she'd unlatched all three windows and made certain twice that the door could still be opened from the hallway, she sat in the chair by the fire.

"What do I do now?" she muttered. Presently she wore the finest things she'd ever donned. Did she keep them on? Did she put on her plain night rail and climb into bed? Did she simply remove all her clothes and wait to be ravished? Oh, perhaps she should have asked Amy some questions, after all.

Growling under her breath, she fidgeted for a moment and then rose to check the windows again. Outside snow fell silent and cold on the hillsides, with no sign of footprints below her window—or anywhere in her view.

“What are ye doing there?” Brennan asked quietly from the doorway.

She whipped around as he slipped inside and shut the door behind himself, turning the key in the lock. Her heart skipped several beats and then began racing like she’d run for miles.

“I thought ... I thought you might be climbing in through the window. Several of your cousins have been known to do that.”

He grinned. “I dunnae doubt it. *I*, however, prefer nae to cling to stone walls out in the snow in the middle of the night.”

“That’s very sensible of you.”

Nodding, he strolled toward her. “I’m glad ye’re still wearing that gown. I’ve been imagining peeling it off ye since I saw ye in it.”

Oh my. “I borrowed it from Temperance.”

“I reckoned the other lasses knew someaught was afoot. There was far too much smiling going on for any man to be easy.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything, but I didn’t want to wear the same gray dress I’ve worn for the past seven Christmases.”

“Tell whoever ye wish to, Jane. I’ve nae a thing to hide.” Reaching out, he took both her hands in his. Unlike hers, his fingers were warm and steady. “I cannae believe I’ve known ye for but a few days. I’ve had a lass or two cross my path in the last seven years, and nae a one of them gave me goose bumps. Ye do.”

“I give you goose bumps?” It was likely a silly question, but what he said sounded so wonderful that she couldn’t quite believe he was talking about her.

“Ye do.” Tugging her a breath closer, he leaned his head down and kissed her.

Jane closed her eyes, the warmth of his mouth, his breath against her cheek, the faint taste of whisky, all mingling and stirring in her senses, thick enough she could almost touch them. But she *could* touch them, because she could touch *him*.

Slowly she ran her fingers up his forearms, then higher, until she could slide her arms around the back of his neck. With a low sound that made her shiver all the way down her spine, he deepened the kiss, teasing at her mouth until she opened to him, and their tongues tangled.

“I should tell you something,” she managed, her voice ragged.

“Aye?”

“I’ve sacked myself from Lady Aldriss’s employ.”

His muscles tightened around her. “Ye mean to leave for London, then?”

Jane shook her head. “No. At the moment I seem to have no plans, whatsoever.”

“Well now. That’s a bonny thing, I reckon, lass.” With a slow smile he put his hands around her waist and then slid them upward, brushing the outsides of her breasts, and she shivered again. If she’d ever dared dream about a man who might want her, the image of him would have been Brennan Andrews. Quiet, thoughtful, funny, kind, compassionate, handsome—and quite spectacular at kissing. She even liked that he wasn’t quite perfect, because Lord knew she was far from perfection, herself. And there he stood, gazing at her with his one green eye, his arms close around her.

“I don’t know what to do,” she admitted, running her fingers along the scar below his eye patch. “And I don’t want to do something wrong.”

“I know what to do,” he returned, “though it’s been a while. And as long as ye dunnae laugh at me, I’ll have nae complaints.”

“So you say now. Just please tell me again that you’re serious about this. About me.”

“Jane,” he murmured, his gaze holding hers, “I am serious about ye. Good God, lass, I’ve been thinking about nae but ye since I first saw ye. I like ye, a great deal. I want ye. If ye dunnae believe that, then just look at me.”

With that he took a step back, gesturing at himself. Unable to stop herself, Jane looked down. The unmistakable jut at the front of his kilt—she knew what that was, what it meant. And it was because of her. A man couldn’t pretend that.

“Turn around, Jane.”

She did so, her breath catching as Brennan opened the buttons running partway down her back. “Please don’t ruin it,” she said, abruptly remembering what she was wearing. “I need to return it.”

“It should be yers. Scarlet suits ye, lass.”

When he’d unbuttoned the dress, she untied the ribbon beneath her breasts and pulled the gown off her shoulders. As a warm mouth kissed the nape of her neck and trailed slowly down her spine, her breath caught. This was not some imagining. He was real. He wanted her. And for heaven’s sake, she wanted him.

Turning around again, Jane caught his mouth with hers, wrapping her hands into his coat to hold herself closer against him. Desire, need, arousal, flooded through her, unaccustomed but intoxicating.

Brennan tugged down the front of the gown, holding her away from him a little as he lowered his gaze to her exposed breasts. She was by no means voluptuous, but if that disappointed him she couldn’t detect it. When he sent her a brief, wicked grin and then lowered his head to lick one of them, she gasped.

Then he closed his mouth over it, his tongue flicking across her nipple, and lightning shot down her spine. The warm damp between her legs, the delighted shivers running beneath her skin ... *Good heavens.*

With him dividing his attention between her breasts and her mouth, he shrugged out of his coat, dropping it onto the floor beside them. Brennan pulled his shirt off over his head and let it fall from his fingers. “Touch me, Jane,” he murmured, taking one of her hands and placing it on his chest. “I want to feel yer touch.”

While he unbuckled his kilt, she sent her hands exploring him. He was lean and fit, hard muscles beneath soft, warm skin. Muscles that jumped as her fingers and her palm caressed him. A man—this man—reacting to her touch. It was a powerful, heady sensation.

Why he’d chosen her she didn’t know, but it occurred to her that she’d never felt shy or awkward in his presence, either. It was as if they fit, somehow. As if they belonged together. “Brennan,” she whispered, kissing him again, kissing his mouth and his jaw where a stubble of rough beard had begun.

His kilt landed atop the rest of his clothes. Jane couldn’t not look, so she lowered her gaze. Jutting, large, and unmistakable—a shiver of nervousness went through her again, tangled as it was with a very large measure of unseemly lust. “You do want me.”

“As I’ve said, Jane.” He cupped her face in his hands, holding her gaze with his. “And I mean for this to be the first night. Nae the only night.”

She nodded, dropping her own hands to the top of her gown so she could wriggle out of it, being as careful as she could with every nerve jangling. For a moment she felt very uncoordinated, until she caught Brennan gazing at her breasts, his expression avid. *Well then.* Exaggerating the shift of her hips and the roll of her shoulders, she shed the gorgeous gown and left it in a scarlet puddle around her feet.

“Ye’re stunning, lass,” he muttered, and bent to sweep her up in his arms.

Gasping again, she flung her arms around his neck. Just having her hair not tied back in her proper bun this evening had left her feeling a bit wanton. This, though—she couldn’t even put words to this feeling.

“I want you,” she said unevenly as he laid her down on her bed and moved over her.

By way of answer he shifted down her body, kissing, licking, caressing her as he went. So much attention he paid her, almost worshipful. Could it be true that she was someone for whom he’d searched? It made her seem, and feel, special. Important.

But then his hands traveled up the insides of her thighs, and she couldn’t think of anything but how very naughty she felt, and how very much she wanted more of this sensation. When he touched her ... there, sliding a finger inside her, she jumped, grabbing onto his shoulders and biting her lip to keep from shrieking.

“Ye’re wet for me, Jane,” he muttered huskily.

“Is that a good thing?” she asked when she could speak again.

“Aye. Ye excite me, and I mean to have ye. If ye’ve changed yer mind, then, ye need to tell me. Now.”

That “now” sounded very urgent, and very significant. But it didn’t alarm her as much as it might have previously, because as far as she was concerned, she’d already made this decision, and any that went with it later on. “I was more worried that you would change *your* mind. I am feeling rather brave right now. But I am trusting you, as well.” And she did trust him, in a way she hadn’t ever trusted anyone. Ever. With but a few days of acquaintance between them, trust felt mad, but it also felt right.

“I’ve nae followed my heart for a good long time, either,” he returned, making his way back up her body, pausing at her breasts and making her squirm with delight again. “Dunnae break it, Jane.”

That hadn’t quite occurred to her before, that he was giving her a great deal of his trust, as well. He’d lost his wife, and in seven years he hadn’t found anyone else to share his life. Until her. “I won’t,” she whispered.

Kissing her deeply, he parted her legs with his knees, set his hands on either side of her shoulders, and canted his hips forward. The tight, hot slide of him entering her felt indescribable and so, so satisfying. “Ye’ve nae done this before, ye said,” Brennan whispered, “so this next bit may hurt. I willnae hurt ye again. Ever. Ye have my word, Jane Bansil.”

Digging her fingers into his shoulders, she nodded. He kissed her again, openmouthed, tongues tangling, as he slowly pushed deeper inside her. Sharp pain bit at her and she winced, squeezing her eyes closed but refusing to try to shut her legs. She wanted him there. She wanted all of this.

After a moment she realized he was staying very still, and she opened her eyes again. His right green eye met her gaze and held it, his expression the most intimate, intense one she’d ever seen. So much attention he paid, and all of it focused on her.

“I’m fine,” she panted. “Don’t stop now.”

His quick grin pierced her heart. “As ye wish.”

Slowly he pushed deeper, burying himself in her as she moaned beneath him at the sensation, and the weight of him across her hips. *Good God*. When he withdrew and then entered her again, she shivered from her spine to her toes.

His pace began to increase, and a delicious tightness spread through her. Everywhere he touched her felt alive and warm and aroused. When he groaned, everything let loose at once, sending her into shuddering, moaning ecstasy.

Brennan grunted something in Gaelic, moving into her hard and fast until he froze, shuddering. Panting, he lowered himself onto his elbows and rested his forehead against her shoulder. “Damnation, lass.”

Jane couldn’t speak. Instead, she swept her arms around him, torn between delighted laughter and tears. Her entire world had shifted in one evening, and it had happened in a rather magnificent way.

He turned them sideways, so they were lying face-to-face. “I meant to wait until Hogmanay to do this,” he said, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes, “because I reckoned it would be spectacular with the bonfires and celebrating. But I have realized that ye and I, Jane, we arenae about bonfires and crowds. We’re quiet folk, favoring books and a crackling fire in the hearth and mayhap a stroll through the village.”

She didn’t know quite what he was talking about, but the things he said sounded dreamily wonderful, especially on a Christmas Eve with silent snow falling outside. “That sounds perfect,” she breathed, and he kissed her again.

“Aye, it does. I love that ye like to read, Jane. I love that ye’re clever and funny. I love that ye shiver when I kiss ye. I love the way ye look me in the eye when ye speak to me. I love nae that ye’ve had a hard life, but that it’s made ye ... strong.”

“You’re saying very nice things,” she murmured.

“I’m nae finished. I love that when ye see a problem ye dunnae blurt out any nonsense, but ye look at it from all the sides and then figure out exactly what’s needed. And I love that ye trust me.”

Had she done all those things? Or was it that he simply liked—loved—who she naturally was? That was amazing. “Thank you, Brennan.”

“I suppose,” he went on, studying her face, “that if I love all the facets of ye, then the natural conclusion is that I love ye. I’m in love with ye. I ken it’s only been a few days, but as I said, I’m nae fooling about. Having ye here has been like seeing spring’s first sun.”

“Brennan, I don’t know how long a person is supposed to wait before they’ve decided they know someone else well enough, but I feel the same way. I love you. I never believed in love at first sight, but I love you.”

“God’s sake, Jane,” he said quietly, running a finger down her cheek. “I’m nae a youngster looking to begin a life. I ken

what I want, and who I want, and that is ye. Will ye marry me, Jane Bansil?"

The Jane of a few weeks ago might have closed her eyes, preferring to weigh such an important decision logically, without the temptation of a very handsome man lying well within arm's reach. She would have hesitated, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of such a union, and what it would mean to her future employment possibilities and the convenience of all the people around her.

This Jane didn't want to close her eyes, because she very much liked the man at whom she was looking. This Jane had learned a great deal about herself over the past few days. And she liked this version of herself. And she liked where her life was leading her now. Very much. If it had taken an arrow or two from Cupid to send her in this direction, to send Brennan to her, then so be it.

"You've made me excited about my life again, you know. And hopeful, and happy. Yes, Brennan Andrews, I will marry you. I would marry you twice, if I could."

He chuckled, kissing her slow and deep. "I do love ye, lass. And I've changed my mind about Christmas. I reckon we'll be celebrating it from now on."

That made her laugh. "Don't let on that I've converted you; your cousins will begin calling you a Sassenach."

"They can try." Placing a kiss on her forehead, he rolled them again, so she lay atop him. The position made her feel breathless and powerful all at the same time. "I should tell ye, the minute ye left my house yesterday, I started pulling down the wall between my parlor and the wee library. I'm making ye a grand library, Jane, with space for every book ye'd ever want."

"You started it yesterday?" she asked, wiping at an unexpected tear.

"I couldnae imagine a life without ye in it. Happy Christmas, Jane, my heart."

Taking a breath, she lowered her head to kiss him softly on the mouth. “Happy Christmas, Brennan, my love.”

About the Author



Dinamariephotography.com

A native and current resident of Southern California, **Suzanne Enoch** loves movies almost as much as she loves books, with a special place in her heart for anything Star Wars. She has written more than forty Regency novels and historical romances, which are regularly found on the *New York Times* bestseller list. When she is not busily working on her next book, Suzanne likes to contemplate interesting phenomena, like how the three guppies in her aquarium became 161 guppies in five months. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



**Thank you for buying this
St. Martin's Press ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us online at

us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on Suzanne Enoch, click [here](#).

For email updates on Amelia Grey, click [here](#).

For email updates on Anna Bennett, click [here](#).

Contents

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Great Scot!

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

About the Author

Copyright

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by St. Martin's Paperbacks, an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

Great Scot! copyright © 2022 by Suzanne Enoch.

All rights reserved.

For information address St. Martin's Publishing Group, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.stmartins.com

eISBN: 9781250801265

Our ebooks may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, ext. 5442, or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

St. Martin's Paperbacks edition / 2022