

BOOK ONE IN THE MULTI-MILLION BESTSELLING  
*OUTLANDER* SERIES

DIANA  
GABALDON  
OUTLANDER



NOW A MAJOR TV SERIES

# OUTLANDER

**DIANA GABALDON** is the author of the international bestselling Outlander novels and Lord John Grey series

She says that the Outlander series started by accident: ‘I decided to write a novel for practice in order to learn what it took to write a novel, and to decide whether I really wanted to do it for real. I did – and here we all are trying to decide what to call books that nobody can describe, but that fortunately most people seem to enjoy.’

And enjoy them they do – in their millions, all over the world. Published in 42 countries and 38 languages, in 2014 the Outlander novels were made into an acclaimed TV series starring Sam Heughan as Jamie Fraser and Caitriona Balfe as Claire.

Diana lives with her husband and dogs in Scottsdale, Arizona, and is currently at work on her ninth Outlander novel.

## OUTLANDER SERIES

### **Outlander** (previously published as *Cross Stitch*)

Claire Randall passes through a circle of standing stones and finds herself in Jacobite Scotland, pursued by danger and forcibly married to another man – a young Scots warrior named Jamie Fraser.

### **Dragonfly in Amber**

For twenty years Claire Randall has kept the secrets of an ancient battle and her daughter's heritage. But the dead don't sleep, and the time for silence is long past.

### **Voyager**

Jamie Fraser died on the battlefield of Culloden – or did he? Claire seeks through the darkness of time for the man who once was her soul – and might be once again.

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DIANA  
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OUTLANDER



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To the Memory of My Mother  
Who Taught Me to Read  
Jacqueline Sykes Gabaldon



# Introduction

I was eight years old when I realized that people *wrote* books. They didn't just spring out of the bookshelves like toilet paper in the grocery store; someone actually put words on paper and somehow a book happened. Astonishing!

My family lived in Flagstaff, up in the high mountains of Arizona, and on Sundays when the weather was good, we'd drive out to the nearby cinder hills and spend a few hours exploring. We found thousands of pottery shards left by the indigenous people of the area, pinon nuts and the sticky, fragrant cones they come from, white-barked aspen trees with sap the color of blood – and on one unforgettable occasion, a bobcat.

The drive back was always quiet, everybody tired from running and walking and climbing – those were the days when I was made of elastic and eiderdown and could spring over rocks and logs like a springbok.

Coming back from one summer outing, I was leaning my face against the cool glass of the window, watching the huge afternoon thunderheads build up, masses of clouds gathering out of nowhere. And I was having a conversation with God.

The priest who taught Religious Education had recently introduced the third grade to the notion that prayer is talking to God, and suggested that we might do just that, privately, as an alternative to the formal sorts of prayers we had in church. So I'd been giving that a try – I remember experimentally telling God about grasshoppers (silently, to be sure) during one long (Latin, in those days) Mass.

In the mood induced by tiredness and clouds, I was not really praying, but I was thinking about books (I read incessantly; when I wasn't reading, I was looking



forward to reading) – and found myself telling God that I thought I was supposed to write books (though I had not the slightest idea how such a thing could be done); I wanted to write the sort of books that would ‘lift people up’ (as close as I could come to describing the effect of a book that takes the reader out of the limits of mind and body).

And God said (approximately), ‘OK. That sounds like a good idea.’

Now, I did not set to writing books at once; I had no idea how *that* worked. But I did hold on to the idea that I was supposed to write books.

I did *not* confide this ambition to my parents. While deeply loving and highly literate, my parents were both born in 1930; they were children during the Depression and teenagers during World War II – it was All About Security, and getting a good job with health benefits and a good pension. My father was fond of saying to me, ‘You’re such a poor judge of character, you’re bound to marry some bum, so get a good education so you can support your children.’

Little as I knew about being a novelist, I was pretty sure they didn’t get a regular salary, let alone a pension. So I kept quiet about my literary convictions, and got a Ph.D. in Quantitative Behavioral Ecology (that’s just animal behavior with a lot of statistics, don’t worry about it).

I liked science. I was good at it. But I still knew that I was supposed to be a novelist.

And when I turned thirty-five, I said to myself, ‘Mozart was *dead* at thirty-six! Maybe you’d better get a move on.’

So I decided that on my thirty-sixth birthday, I would begin writing a book. What sort of book? Who knew? I didn’t think I knew enough to write a mystery or science-fiction (I read absolutely anything, but at the time, was most given to what you might call speculative fiction, preferably with blood). So . . . what might be the *easiest* kind of book to write?

This was, after all, going to be purely a practice book, written for the sole purpose of learning *how* to write a novel – so it didn’t really matter what kind of book it was, did it?

Well, for me, I thought the easiest thing to write might be historical fiction (I read a lot of that, too). I was a university professor; I knew my way around a library. It seemed easier to look things up than make them up entirely – and if I turned out to have no imagination, I could steal things from the historical record.

All right. Where and when should I set this book? I had no particular background in history, save the six hours of Western Civilization they made us take as undergraduates. I'd have to look everything up anyway, so time and place didn't really matter.

So I began contemplating times and places: Ancient Babylonia? Venice under the Borgias? American Civil War?

And somewhere in the midst of this contemplation, I happened to see a really old episode of *Doctor Who* on public television. (It was part of the 'War Games' sequence, with Patrick Troughton as the Second Doctor.) In this particular episode, the Doctor had picked up a young Scotsman from 1745 – a dashing young man who appeared in his kilt.

'Well, that's rather fetching,' I thought.

I was still thinking about it during church the next day, and, with a mental shrug, said, 'OK, why not? The important thing is to pick a place and get started. All right; Scotland, eighteenth century.'

So that's where I began: knowing nothing about Scotland *or* the eighteenth century. Having no plot, no outline and no characters – only the vague images conjured up by the notion of a Man in a Kilt.

Which, as I think you will all agree, is a very compelling image.

And so I began.

I hope you will enjoy the journey.

*Diana Gabaldon*  
All Hallows Eve, 2019



# OUTLANDER



People disappear all the time. Ask any policeman. Better yet, ask a journalist. Disappearances are bread and butter to journalists.

Young girls run away from home. Young children stray from their parents and are never seen again. Housewives reach the end of their tether and take the grocery money and a taxi to the station. International financiers change their names and vanish into the smoke of imported cigars.

Many of the lost will be found, eventually, dead or alive. Disappearances, after all, have explanations.

Usually.



# **PART ONE**

**Inverness, 1946**





## A New Beginning

It wasn't a very likely place for disappearances, at least at first glance. Mrs Baird's was like a thousand other Highland bed-and-breakfast establishments in 1946; clean and quiet, with fading floral wallpaper, gleaming floors and a coin-operated water heater in the bathroom. Mrs Baird herself was squat and easygoing, and made no objection to Frank lining her tiny rose-sprigged parlour with the dozens of books and papers with which he always travelled.

I met Mrs Baird in the front hall on my way out. She stopped me with a pudgy hand on my arm and patted at my hair.

'Dear me, Mrs Randall, ye canna go out like that! Here, just let me tuck that bit in for ye. There! That's better. Ye know, my cousin was tellin' me about a new perm she tried, comes out beautiful and holds like a dream; perhaps ye should try that kind next time.'

I hadn't the heart to tell her that the waywardness of my light brown curls was strictly the fault of nature, and not due to any dereliction on the part of the permanent-wave manufacturers. Her own tightly marcelled waves suffered from no such perversity.

'Yes, I'll do that, Mrs Baird,' I lied. 'I'm just going down to meet Frank. We'll be back for tea.' I ducked out of the door and down the path before she could detect any further defects in my undisciplined appearance. After five years as an army nurse, I was enjoying the escape from uniforms by indulging in brightly printed blouses and long skirts, totally unsuited for rough walking through the heather.

Not that I had originally planned to do a lot of that; my thoughts ran more on the lines of sleeping late in the mornings, and long, lazy afternoons in bed with Frank, not

sleeping. However, it was difficult to maintain the proper mood of languorous romance with Mrs Baird industriously Hoovering away outside our door.

‘That must be the dirtiest bit of carpet in the entire Scottish Highlands,’ Frank had observed that morning as we lay in bed listening to the ferocious roar of the vacuum in the hallway.

‘Nearly as dirty as our landlady’s mind,’ I agreed. ‘Perhaps we should have gone to Brighton after all.’ We had chosen the Highlands as a place to holiday before Frank took up his appointment as a history professor at Oxford, on the grounds that Scotland had been somewhat less touched by the physical horrors of war than the rest of Britain, and was less susceptible to the frenetic postwar gaiety that infected more popular holiday spots.

And without discussing it, I think we both felt that it was a symbolic place to re-establish our marriage; we had been married and spent a two-day honeymoon in the Highlands, shortly before the outbreak of war seven years before. A peaceful refuge in which to rediscover each other, we thought, not realizing that, while golf and fishing are Scotland’s most popular outdoor sports, gossip is the most popular indoor sport. And when it rains as much as it does in Scotland, people spend a lot of time indoors.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked as Frank swung his feet out of bed.

‘I’d hate the dear old thing to be disappointed in us,’ he answered. Sitting up on the side of the ancient bed he bounced gently up and down, creating a piercing rhythmic squeak. The Hoovering in the hall stopped abruptly. After a minute or two of bouncing he gave a loud, theatrical groan and collapsed backwards with a twang of protesting springs. I giggled helplessly into a pillow, so as not to disturb the breathless silence outside.

Frank wagged his eyebrows at me. ‘You’re supposed to moan ecstatically, not giggle,’ he admonished in a whisper. ‘She’ll think I’m not a good lover.’

‘You’ll have to keep it up for longer than that if you

expect ecstatic moans,' I answered. 'Two minutes doesn't deserve any more than a giggle.'

'Inconsiderate wench. I came here for a rest, remember?'

'Lazybones. You'll never manage the next branch on your family tree unless you show a bit more industry than that.'

Frank's passion for genealogy was yet another reason for choosing the Highlands. According to one of the filthy scraps of paper he lugged to and fro, some tiresome ancestor of his had had something to do with something or other in this region back in the middle of the eighteenth – or was it seventeenth? – century.

'If I end up as a childless stub on my family tree, it will undoubtedly be the fault of our untiring hostess out there. After all, we've been married almost seven years. Little Frank will be quite legitimate without being conceived in the presence of a witness.'

'If he's conceived at all,' I said pessimistically. We had been disappointed yet again the week before leaving for our Highland retreat.

'With all this bracing fresh air and healthy diet? How could we help but manage here?' High tea the night before had been herring, fried. Lunch had been herring, pickled. And the pungent scent now wafting up the stairwell strongly intimated that breakfast was to be herring, kippered.

'Unless you're contemplating an encore performance for the edification of Mrs Baird,' I suggested, 'you'd better get dressed. Aren't you meeting that parson at ten?' The Reverend Mr Reginald Wakefield, minister of the local parish, was to provide some rivetingly fascinating baptismal registers for Frank's inspection, not to mention the glittering prospect that he might have unearthed some mouldering army dispatches or somesuch that mentioned the notorious ancestor.

'What's the name of that six-times-great-grandfather of yours again?' I asked. 'The one who mucked about here during one of the Risings? I can't remember if it was Willy or Walter.'

'Actually, it was Jonathan.' Frank took my complete disinterest in family history placidly, but remained always

on guard, ready to seize the slightest expression of inquisitiveness as an excuse for telling me all facts known to date about the early Randalls and their connections. His eyes assumed the fervid gleam of the fanatic lecturer as he buttoned his shirt.

‘Jonathan Wolverton Randall – Wolverton for his mother’s uncle, a minor knight from Sussex. He was, however, known by the rather dashing nickname of “Black Jack”, something he acquired in the army, probably during the time he was stationed here.’ I flopped face down on the bed and affected to snore. Ignoring me, Frank went on with his scholarly exegesis.

‘He bought his commission in the mid-thirties – 1730s, that is – and served as a captain of dragoons. According to those old letters Cousin May sent me, he did quite well in the army. Good choice for a second son, you know; his younger brother followed tradition as well by becoming a curate, but I haven’t found out much about him yet. Anyway, Jack Randall was highly commended by the Duke of Sandringham for his activities before and during the 45 – the second Jacobite Rising, you know,’ he amplified for the benefit of the ignorant amongst his audience, namely me. ‘You know, Bonnie Prince Charlie and that lot.’

‘I’m not entirely sure the Scots realize they lost that one,’ I interrupted, sitting up and trying to subdue my hair. ‘I distinctly heard the barman at that pub last night refer to us as Sassenachs.’

‘Well, why not?’ said Frank equably. ‘It only means “Englishman”, after all, or at worst, outsider and we’re all of that.’

‘I know what it means. It was the tone I objected to.’

Frank searched through the chest of drawers for a belt. ‘He was just annoyed because I told him the beer was weak. I told him the true Highland brew requires an old boot to be added to the vat, and the final product to be strained through a well-worn undergarment.’

‘Ah, that accounts for the amount of the bill.’

‘Well, I phrased it a little more tactfully than that, but

only because the Gaelic language hasn't got a specific word for drawers.'

I reached for a pair of my own, intrigued. 'Why not? Did the ancient Gaels not wear undergarments?'

Frank leered. 'You've never heard that old song about what a Scotsman wears beneath his kilt?'

'Presumably not gents' knee-length step-ins,' I said dryly. 'Perhaps I'll go out in search of a local kilt-wearer whilst you're cavorting with vicars and ask him.'

'Well, do try not to get arrested, Claire. The dean of St Giles College wouldn't like it at all.'

In the event, there were no kilt-wearers loitering about the town or patronizing the shops. There were a number of other people there, though, mostly housewives of the Mrs Baird type, doing their daily shopping. They were garrulous and gossipy, and their solid, tweedy presences filled the shops with a cosy warmth; a buttress against the cold mist of the morning outdoors.

With as yet no house of my own to keep, I had little that needed buying – there was little to buy yet, in truth; supplies were still short – but enjoyed myself in browsing among the sparse shelves of the shops.

My gaze lingered on a shop window containing a scattering of household goods – embroidered tea cloths, a set of jug and glasses, a stack of homely pie tins and a set of three vases.

I had never owned a vase in my life. During the war years I had, of course, lived in the nurses' quarters, first at Pembroke Hospital, later at the field station in France. But even before that we had lived nowhere long enough to justify the purchase of such an item. Had I had such a thing, I reflected, Uncle Lamb would have filled it with potsherds long before I could have got near it with a bunch of daisies.

Quentin Lambert Beauchamp. 'Q' to his archaeological students and his friends. 'Dr Beauchamp' to the scholarly circles in which he moved and lectured and had his being. But always Uncle Lamb to me.

My father's only brother, and my only living relative, he had been landed with me, aged five, when my parents were killed in a car crash. Poised for a trip to the Middle East at the time, he had paused in his preparations long enough to make the funeral arrangements, dispose of my parents' estates and enrol me in a proper girls' boarding school. Which I had flatly refused to attend.

Faced with the necessity of prying my chubby fingers off the car's door handle and dragging me by the heels up the steps of the school, Uncle Lamb, who hated personal conflict of any kind, had sighed in exasperation, then finally shrugged and tossed his better judgement out of the window along with my newly purchased round straw boater.

'Ruddy thing,' he muttered, seeing it rolling merrily away in the rear-view mirror as we roared down the drive in high gear. 'Always loathed hats on women, anyway.' He had glanced down at me, fixing me with a fierce glare.

'One thing,' he said, in awful tones. 'You are *not* to play dolls with my Persian grave figurines. Anything else, but not that. Is that clear?'

I had nodded, content. And had gone with him to the Middle East, to South America, to dozens of study sites throughout the world. Had learned to read and write from the drafts of journal articles, to dig latrines and boil water, and to do a number of other things not suitable for a young lady of gentle birth – until I had met the handsome, dark-haired historian who came to consult Uncle Lamb on a point of French philosophy as it related to Egyptian religious practice.

Even after our marriage Frank and I led the nomadic life of junior faculty, divided between continental conferences and temporary flats, until the outbreak of war had sent him to Officer's Training and the Intelligence Unit at MI6, and me to nurse's training. Though we had been married nearly eight years, the new house in Oxford would be our first real home.

Tucking my handbag firmly under my arm, I marched into the shop and bought the vases.

I met Frank at the crossing of the High Street and the Gereside Road and we turned up it together. He raised his eyebrows at my purchases.

'Vases?' He smiled. 'Wonderful. Perhaps now you'll stop putting flowers in my books.'

'They aren't flowers, they're specimens. And it was you who suggested I take up botany. To occupy my mind, now that I've no nursing to do,' I reminded him.

'True.' He nodded good-humouredly. 'But I didn't realize I'd have bits of greenery dropping out into my lap every time I opened a reference. What was that horrible crumbly brown stuff you put in Tuscum and Banks?'

'Comfrey. Good for haemorrhoids.'

'Preparing for my imminent old age, are you? Well, how very thoughtful of you, Claire.'

We had promised to drop in on the Carsons, round the corner. We pushed through the gate, laughing, and Frank stood back to let me go first up the narrow front steps.

Suddenly he caught my arm. 'Look out! You don't want to step in it.'

I lifted my foot gingerly over a large brownish-red stain on the top step.

'How odd,' I said. 'Mrs Carson scrubs the steps down every morning; I've seen her. What do you suppose that can be?'

Frank leaned over the step, sniffing delicately.

'Offhand, I should say that it's blood.'

'Blood!' I took a step back into the entryway. 'Whose?' I glanced nervously into the house. 'Do you suppose the Carsons have had an accident of some kind?' I couldn't imagine our tidy neighbours leaving bloodstains to dry on their doorstep unless some major catastrophe had occurred, and wondered just for a moment whether the parlour might be harbouring a crazed axe-murderer, even now preparing to spring out on us with a spine-chilling shriek.

Frank shook his head. He stood on tiptoe to peer over the hedge into the next garden.

'I shouldn't think so. There's a stain like it on the Collin-ses' doorstep as well.'



‘Really?’ I drew closer to Frank, both to see over the hedge and for moral support. The Highlands hardly seemed a likely spot for a mass murderer, but then I doubted such persons used any sort of logical criteria when picking their sites. ‘That’s rather . . . disagreeable,’ I observed. There was no sign of life from the next residence. ‘What do you suppose has happened?’

Frank frowned, thinking, then slapped his hand ‘riefly against his trouser leg in inspiration.

‘I think I know! Wait here a moment.’ He darted out to the gate and set off down the road at a trot, leaving me stranded on the edge of the doorstep.

He was back shortly, beaming with confirmation.

‘Yes, that’s it, it must be. Every house in the row has had it.’

‘Had what? A visit from a homicidal maniac?’ I spoke a bit sharply, still nervous at having been abruptly abandoned with nothing but a large bloodstain for company.

Frank laughed. ‘No, a ritual sacrifice. Fascinating!’ He was down on his hands and knees in the grass, peering interestedly at the stain.

This hardly sounded better than a homicidal maniac. I squatted beside him, wrinkling my nose at the smell. It was early for flies, but a horde of the tiny, voracious Highland midges circled the stain.

‘What do you mean, “ritual sacrifice”?’ I demanded. ‘Mrs Carson’s a good church-goer, and so are all the neighbours. This isn’t Druid’s Hill or anything, you know.’

He stood, brushing grass-ends from his trousers. ‘That’s all you know, my girl,’ he said. ‘There’s no place on earth with more of the old superstitions and magic mixed into its daily life than the Scottish Highlands. Church or no church, Mrs Carson believes in the Old Folk, and so do all the neighbours.’ He pointed at the stain with one neatly polished toe. ‘The blood of a black cock,’ he explained, looking pleased. ‘The houses are new, you see. Pre-fabs.’

I looked at him coldly. ‘If you are under the impression that that explains everything, think again. What difference

does it make how old the houses are? And where on earth is everybody?’

‘Down at the pub, I should expect. Let’s go along and see, shall we?’ Taking my arm, he steered me out of the gate and we set off down the Gereside Road.

‘In the old days,’ he explained as we went, ‘and not so long ago, either, when a house was built it was customary to kill something and bury it under the foundation, as a propitiation to the local earth spirits. You know, “He shall lay the foundations thereof in his firstborn and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it.” Old as the hills.’

I shuddered at the quotation. ‘In that case, I suppose it’s quite modern and enlightened of them to be using chickens instead. You mean, since the houses are fairly new, nothing was buried under them, and the inhabitants are now remedying the omission.’

‘Yes, exactly.’ Frank seemed pleased with my progress, and patted me on the back. ‘According to the minister, many of the local folk thought the war was due in part to people turning away from their roots and omitting to take proper precautions, such as burying a sacrifice under the foundation, that is, or burning fishes’ bones on the hearth – except haddocks, of course,’ he added, happily distracted. ‘You never burn a haddock’s bones – did you know? – or you’ll never catch another. Always bury the bones of a haddock instead.’

‘I’ll bear it in mind,’ I said. ‘Tell me what you do in order never to see another herring, and I’ll do it forthwith.’

He shook his head, absorbed in one of his feats of memory, those brief periods of scholastic rapture where he lost touch with the world around him, absorbed completely in conjuring up knowledge from all its sources.

‘I don’t know about herring,’ he said absently. ‘For mice, though, you hang bunches of Trembling Jock about – “Trembling Jock i’ the hoose, and ye’ll ne’er see a moose”, you know. Bodies under the foundation, though – that’s where a lot of the local ghosts come from. You know Mountgerald, the big house at the end of the High Street? There’s a ghost there, a workman on the house who was

killed as a sacrifice for the foundation. It was some time in the eighteenth century; that's really fairly recent,' he added thoughtfully.

'The story goes that by order of the house's owner, one wall was built up first, then a stone block was dropped from the top of it on to one of the workmen – presumably a dislikable fellow was chosen for the sacrifice – and he was buried then in the cellar and the rest of the house built up over him. He haunts the cellar where he was killed, except on the anniversary of his death and the four Old Days.'

'Old Days?'

'The ancient feasts,' he explained, still lost in his mental notes. 'Hogmanay, that's New Year's Eve, Midsummer Day, Beltane and All Hallow's, Druids, Beaker Folk, early Picts, everybody kept the sun feasts and the fire feasts, so far as we know. Anyway, ghosts are freed on the holy days, and can wander about at will, to do harm or good as they please.' He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'It's getting on for Beltane – the Celtic May Day festival. Best keep an eye out next time you pass the kirkyard.' His eyes twinkled, and I realized the trance had ended.

I laughed. 'Are there a number of famous local ghosts, then?'

He shrugged. 'Don't know. We'll ask Mr Wakefield, shall we, next time we see him?'

We saw Mr Wakefield that evening, in fact. He, along with most of the other inhabitants of the neighbourhood, was in the hotel lounge, having a lemonade in celebration of the houses' new sanctification.

He seemed rather embarrassed at being caught in the act of condoning a paganism, as it were, but brushed it off as merely a local observance with historical colour, like the Wearing of the Green.

'Really rather fascinating, you know,' he confided, and I recognized, with an internal sigh, the song of the scholar, as identifying a sound as the call of a cuckoo. Harking to the sound of a kindred spirit, Frank at once settled down to the mating dance of academe and they were soon neck-deep in archetypes and the parallels between ancient super-

stitutions and modern religions. I snagged a passing waitress and secured a couple of cups of tea.

Knowing from experience how difficult it was to distract Frank's attention from this sort of discussion, I simply picked up his hand, wrapped his fingers about the handle of the cup and left him to his own devices.

I found our landlady, Mrs Baird, on a loveseat near the window, sharing a companionable plate of digestive biscuits with an elderly man whom she introduced to me as Mr Crook.

'This is the man I tell't ye about, Mrs Randall,' she said, eyes bright with the stimulation of company. 'The one as knows about plants of all sorts.'

'Mrs Randall's verra much interested in the wee plants,' she confided to her companion, who inclined his head in a combination of politeness and deafness. 'Presses them in books and such.'

'Do ye, indeed?' Mr Crook asked, one tufted white brow raised in interest. 'I've some presses – the real ones, mind – for plants and such. Had them from my nephew, when he came up from university over his holiday. He brought them for me, and I'd not the heart to tell him I never use such things. Hangin's what's wanted for herbs, ye ken, or maybe to be dried on a frame and put in a bit o' gauze bag or a jar, but why ever you'd be after squashing the wee things flat, I've no idea.'

'Well, to look at, maybe,' Mrs Baird interjected kindly. 'Mrs Randall's made some lovely bits out of wood anenome, and violets, same as you could put in a frame and hang on the wall, like.'

'Mmmphm.' Mr Crook's seamed face seemed to be admitting a dubious possibility to this suggestion. 'Weel, if they're of any use to ye, Missus, you can have the presses, and welcome. I didna wish to be throwing them awa', but I must say I've no use for them.'

I assured Mr Crook that I would be delighted to make use of the plant presses, and still more delighted if he would show me where some of the rarer plants in the area could be found. He eyed me sharply for a moment, head to one

side like an elderly kestrel, but appeared finally to decide that my interest was genuine, and we fixed it up that I should meet him in the morning for a tour of the local shrubbery. Frank, I knew, meant to spend the morning consulting records in the town hall, and I was pleased to have an excuse not to accompany him. One record was much like another, so far as I was concerned.

Soon after this Frank prised himself away from the minister and we walked home in company with Mrs Baird. I was reluctant to mention the cock's blood we had seen on the doorsteps, myself, but Frank suffered from no such reticence, and questioned her eagerly as to the background of the custom.

'I suppose it's quite old, then?' he asked, swishing a stick along through the roadside weeds. Fat hen and cinquefoil were green in the ditches, and I could see the buds of sweet broom just starting to show.

'Och, aye.' Mrs Baird waddled along at a brisk pace, asking no quarter from our younger limbs. 'Older than anyone knows, Mr Randall. Even back before the days of the giants.'

'Giants?' I asked.

'Aye. Fionn and the Feinn, ye ken.'

'Gaelic folktales,' Frank remarked with interest. 'Heroes, you know. Probably from Norse roots. There's a lot of the Norse influence around here, and all the way up the coast to the West. Some of the place names are Norse, you know, not Gaelic at all.'

I rolled my eyes, sensing another outburst, but Mrs Baird smiled kindly and encouraged him, saying that was true, then; she'd been up to the north, and seen the Two Brothers stone, and that was Norse, wasn't it?

'The Norsemen came down on that coast hundreds of times between AD 500 and 1300 or so,' Frank said, looking dreamily at the horizon, seeing dragon-ships in the wind-swept cloud. 'Vikings, you know. And they brought a lot of their own myths along. It's a good country for myths. Things seem to take root here.'

This I could believe. Twilight was coming on, and so

was a storm. In the eerie light beneath the clouds even the thoroughly modern houses along the road looked as ancient and as sinister as the weathered Pictish stone that stood a hundred feet away, guarding the crossroads it had marked for a thousand years. It seemed a good night to be inside with the shutters fastened.

Rather than staying cosily in Mrs Baird's parlour to be entertained by stereopticon views of Perth, though, Frank chose to keep his appointment for sherry with Mr Bainbridge, a solicitor with an interest in local historical records. Bearing in mind my earlier encounter with Mr Bainbridge, I elected to stay at home.

'Try to come back before the storm breaks,' I said, kissing Frank goodbye. 'And give my regards to Mr Bainbridge.'

'Umm, yes. Yes, of course.' Carefully not meeting my eye, Frank shrugged into his overcoat and left, collecting an umbrella from the stand by the door.

I closed the door after him but left it on the latch so he could get back in. I wandered back towards the parlour, reflecting that Frank would doubtless pretend that he didn't have a wife – a pretence in which Mr Bainbridge would cheerfully join. Not that I could blame him, particularly.

At first, everything had gone quite well on our visit to Mr Bainbridge's home the afternoon before. I had been demure, genteel, intelligent but self-effacing, well groomed and quietly dressed – everything the Perfect Don's Wife should be. Until the tea was served.

I now turned my right hand over, ruefully examining the large blister that ran across the bases of all four fingers. After all, it was not my fault that Mr Bainbridge, a widower, made do with a cheap tin teapot instead of a proper crockery one. Nor that the solicitor, seeking to be polite, had asked me to pour. Nor that the potholder he provided had a worn patch that allowed the red-hot handle of the teapot to come into direct contact with my hand when I picked it up.

No, I decided. Dropping the teapot was a perfectly normal reaction. Dropping it on Mr Bainbridge's carpet was merely an accident of placement; I had to drop it somewhere. It was my exclaiming 'Bloody fucking hell!' in

a voice that topped Mr Bainbridge's heartcry that had made Frank glare at me across the scones.

Once he recovered from the shock Mr Bainbridge had been quite gallant, fussing about my hand and ignoring Frank's attempts to excuse my language on grounds that I had been stationed in a field hospital for the better part of two years. 'I'm afraid my wife picked up a number of, er, colourful expressions from the Yanks and such,' Frank offered, with a nervous smile.

'True,' I said, gritting my teeth as I wrapped a water-soaked napkin about my hand. 'Men tend to be very "colourful" when you're picking shrapnel out of them.'

Mr Bainbridge had tactfully tried to distract the conversation on to neutral historical ground by saying that he had always been interested in the variations of what was considered profane speech through the ages. There was 'gorblimey' for example, a recent corruption of the oath 'God blind me'.

'Yes, of course,' said Frank, gratefully accepting the diversion. 'No sugar, thank you, Claire. What about "Gadzooks"? The "Gad" part is quite clear, of course, but the "zook" . . .'

'Well, you know,' the solicitor interjected, 'I've sometimes thought it might be a corruption of an old Scots word, in fact - "yeuk". Means "itch". That would make sense, wouldn't it?'

Frank nodded, letting his unscholarly forelock fall across his forehead. He pushed it back automatically. 'Interesting,' he said, 'the whole evolution of profanity.'

'Yes, and it's still going on,' I said, carefully picking up a lump of sugar with the tongs.

'Oh?' said Mr Bainbridge politely. 'Did you encounter some interesting variations during your, er, war experience?'

'Oh, yes,' I said. 'My favourite was one I picked up from a Yank. Man named Williamson, from New York, I believe. He said it every time I changed his dressing.'

'What was it?'

'"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,"' I said, and dropped the sugar lump neatly and deliberately into Frank's cup.

After a peaceful and not unpleasant sit with Mrs Baird, I made my way upstairs to ready myself before Frank came home. I knew his limit with sherry was two glasses, so I expected him back soon.

The wind was rising and the very air of the bedroom was prickly with electricity. I drew the brush through my hair, making the curls snap with static and spring into knots and furious tangles. My hair would have to do without its hundred strokes tonight, I decided. I would settle for brushing my teeth, in this sort of weather. Strands of hair adhered stickily to my cheeks, clinging stubbornly as I tried to smooth them back.

No water in the ewer; Frank had used it, tidying himself before setting out for his meeting with Mr Bainbridge, and I had not bothered to refill it from the bathroom tap. I picked up the bottle of L'Heure Bleue and poured a generous puddle into the palm of my hand. Rubbing my hands briskly together before the scent could evaporate, I smoothed them rapidly through my hair. I poured another dollop on to my hairbrush and swept the curls back behind my ears with it.

Well. That was rather better, I thought, turning my head from side to side to examine the results in the speckled looking glass. The moisture had dissipated the static electricity in my hair so that it floated in heavy, shining waves about my face. And the evaporating alcohol had left behind a very pleasant scent. Frank would like that, I thought. L'Heure Bleue was his favourite.

There was a sudden flash close at hand, with the crash of thunder following hard on its heels, and all the lights went out. Cursing under my breath, I groped in the drawers.

Somewhere I had seen candles and matches; power failure was so frequent an occurrence in the Highlands that candles were a necessary furnishing for all inn and hotel rooms. I had seen them even in the Royal Edinburgh, where they were scented with honeysuckle and elegantly presented in frosted glass holders with shimmering pendants.

Mrs Baird's candles were far more utilitarian – plain white household candles – but there were a lot of them,



and three boxes of matches as well. I was not inclined to be fussy over style at a time like this.

I fitted a candle to the blue ceramic holder on the dressing table by the light of the next flash, then moved about the room, lighting others, till the whole room was filled with a soft, wavering radiance. Very romantic, I thought, and with some presence of mind I pressed down the light switch so that a sudden return of power shouldn't ruin the mood at some inopportune moment.

The candles had burned no more than half an inch when the door opened and Frank blew in. Literally, for the draught that followed him up the stairs extinguished three of the candles.

The door closed behind him with a bang that blew out two more, and he peered into the sudden gloom, pushing a hand through his dishevelled hair. I got up and relit the candles, making mild remarks about his abrupt methods of entering rooms. It was only when I had finished and turned to ask him whether he'd like a drink that I saw he was looking rather white and unsettled.

'What's the matter?' I said. 'Seen a ghost?'

'Well, you know,' he said slowly, 'I'm not at all sure that I haven't.' Absentmindedly he picked up my hairbrush and raised it to tidy his hair. When a sudden whiff of L'Heure Bleue reached his nostrils, he wrinkled his nose and set it down again, settling for the attentions of his pocket comb instead.

I glanced through the window, where the lime trees were lashing to and fro like flails. It occurred to me that we ought perhaps to close our shutters, though the carry-on outside was rather exciting to watch.

'Bit blustery for a ghost, I'd think,' I said. 'Don't they like quiet, misty evenings in graveyards?'

Frank laughed a bit sheepishly. 'Well, I daresay it's only Bainbridge's stories, plus a bit more of his sherry than I really meant to have. Nothing at all, probably.'

Now I was curious. 'What exactly did you see?' I asked, settling myself on the dressing-table seat. I motioned to the

whisky bottle with a half-lifted brow, and Frank went at once to pour a couple of drinks.

‘Well, only a man, really,’ he began, measuring out a tot for himself and two for me. ‘Standing down in the road outside.’

‘What, outside this house?’ I laughed. ‘Must have been a ghost, then; I can’t imagine any living person standing about on a night like this.’

Frank tilted the ewer over his glass, then looked accusingly at me when no water came out.

‘Don’t look at me,’ I said. ‘You used up all the water. I don’t mind it neat, though.’ I took a sip in illustration.

Frank looked as though he were tempted to nip down to the bathroom for water, but abandoned the idea and went on with his story, sipping cautiously as though his glass contained vitriol rather than the most expensive product of the local illicit stills.

‘Yes, he was down at the edge of the garden on this side, standing by the hedge. I thought’ – he hesitated, looking down into his glass – ‘I rather thought he was looking up at your window.’

‘My window? How extraordinary!’ I couldn’t repress a mild shiver, and went across to fasten the shutters, though it seemed a bit late for that. Frank followed me across the room, still talking.

‘Yes, I could see you myself from below. You were brushing your hair and cursing a bit because it was standing on end.’

‘In that case, the fellow was probably enjoying a good laugh,’ I said tartly. Frank shook his head, though he smiled and smoothed his hands over my hair.

‘No, he wasn’t laughing. In fact, he seemed terribly unhappy about something. Not that I could see his face well; just something about the way he stood. I came up behind him, and when he didn’t move, I asked politely if I could help him with something. He acted at first as though he didn’t hear me, and I thought perhaps he didn’t, over the noise of the wind, so I repeated myself, and I reached out to tap his shoulder, to get his attention, you know. But

before I could touch him he whirled suddenly round and pushed past me and walked off down the road.'

'Sounds a bit rude, but not very ghostly,' I observed, draining my glass. 'What did he look like?'

'Big chap,' said Frank, frowning in recollection. 'And a Scot, in complete Highland rig-out, complete to sporan and the most beautiful running-stag brooch on his plaid. I wanted to ask where he'd got it from, but he was off before I could.'

I went to the chest of drawers and poured another drink. 'Well, not so unusual an appearance for these parts, surely? I've seen men dressed like that in the village now and then.'

'Nooo . . .' Frank sounded doubtful. 'No, it wasn't his dress that was odd. But when he pushed past me I could swear he was close enough that I should have felt him brush my sleeve – but I didn't. And I was intrigued enough to turn round and watch him as he walked away. He walked down the Gereside Road, but when he'd almost reached the corner, he . . . disappeared. That's when I began to feel a bit cold down the backbone.'

'Perhaps your attention was distracted for a second and he just stepped aside into the shadows,' I suggested. 'There are a lot of trees down near that corner.'

'I could swear I didn't take my eyes off him for a moment,' muttered Frank. He looked up suddenly. 'I know! I remember now why I thought he was so odd, though I didn't realize it at the time.'

'What?' I was getting a bit tired of the ghost, and wanted to go on to more interesting matters, such as bed.

'The wind was cutting up like billy-o, but his drapes – his kilt and his plaid, you know – they didn't move at all, except to the stir of his walking.'

We stared at each other. 'Well,' I said finally, 'that is a bit spooky.'

Frank shrugged and smiled suddenly, dismissing it. 'At least I'll have something to tell the minister next time I see him. Perhaps it's a well-known local ghost, and he can give me its gory history.' He glanced at his watch. 'But now I'd say it's bedtime.'

‘So it is,’ I murmured.

I watched him in the mirror as he removed his shirt and reached for a hanger. Suddenly he paused in mid-button.

‘Did you have many Scots in your charge, Claire?’ he asked abruptly. ‘At the field hospital, or at Pembroke?’

‘Of course,’ I replied, somewhat puzzled. ‘There were quite a few of the Seaforths and Camerons through the field hospital at Amiens, and then a bit later, after Caen, we had a lot of the Gordons. Nice chaps, most of them. Very stoic about things generally, but terrible cowards about injections.’ I smiled, remembering one in particular.

‘We had one – rather a crusty old thing really, a piper from the Third Seaforths – who couldn’t stand being stuck, especially not in the hip. He’d go for hours in the most awful discomfort before he’d let anyone near him with a needle, and even then he’d try to get us to give him the injection in the arm, though it’s meant to be intramuscular.’ I laughed at the memory of Corporal Chisholm. ‘He told me, “If I’m goin’ to lie on my face wi’ my buttocks bared, I want the lass *under* me, not behind me wi’ a hatpin!”’

Frank smiled, but looked a trifle uneasy as he often did about my less delicate war stories. ‘Don’t worry,’ I assured him, seeing the look, ‘I won’t tell that one at tea in the Senior Common Room.’

The smile lightened and he came forward to stand behind me as I sat at the dressing table. He pressed a kiss on the top of my head.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘The Senior Common Room will love you, no matter what stories you tell. Mmmm. Your hair smells wonderful.’

‘Do you like it then?’ His hands slid forward over my shoulders in answer, cupping my breasts in the thin night-dress. I could see his head above mine in the mirror, his chin resting on top of my head.

‘I like everything about you,’ he said huskily. ‘You look wonderful by candlelight, you know. Your eyes are like sherry in crystal, and your skin glows like ivory. A candle-light witch, you are. Perhaps I should disconnect the lamps permanently.’

‘Make it hard to read in bed,’ I said, my heart beginning to speed up.

‘I could think of better things to do in bed,’ he murmured.

‘Could you, indeed?’ I said, rising and turning to put my arms about his neck. ‘Like what?’

Some time later, cuddled close behind bolted shutters, I lifted my head from his shoulder and said, ‘Why did you ask me that earlier? About whether I’d had anything to do with any Scots, I mean – you must know I had, there are all sorts of men through those hospitals.’

He stirred and ran a hand softly down my back.

‘Mmm. Oh, nothing, really. Just, when I saw that chap outside, it occurred to me he might be’ – he hesitated, tightening his hold a bit – ‘er, you know, that he might have been someone you’d nursed, perhaps . . . maybe heard you were staying here, and came along to see . . . something like that.’

‘In that case,’ I said practically, ‘why wouldn’t he come in and ask to see me?’

‘Well,’ Frank’s voice was very casual, ‘maybe he didn’t want particularly to run into me.’

I pushed up on to one elbow, staring at him. We had left one candle burning, and I could see him well enough. He had turned his head and was looking oh-so-casually off towards the chromolithograph of Bonnie Prince Charlie with which Mrs Baird had seen fit to decorate our wall.

I grabbed his chin and turned his head to face me. He widened his eyes in simulated surprise.

‘Are you implying,’ I demanded, ‘that the man you saw outside was some sort of, of . . .’ I hesitated, looking for the proper word.

‘Liaison?’ he suggested helpfully.

‘Romantic interest of mine?’ I finished.

‘No, no, certainly not,’ he said unconvincingly. He took my hands away from his face and tried to kiss me, but now it was my turn for head-turning. He settled for pressing me back down to lie beside him.

‘It’s only . . .’ he began. ‘Well, you know, Claire, it *was*

six years. And we saw each other only three times, and only just for the day that last time. It wouldn't be unusual if . . . I mean, everyone knows doctors and nurses are under tremendous stress during emergencies, and . . . well, I . . . it's just that . . . well, I'd understand, you know, if anything, er, of a spontaneous nature . . .'

I interrupted this rambling by jerking free and exploding out of bed.

'Do you think I've been unfaithful to you?' I demanded. 'Do you? Because if so, you can leave this room this instant. Leave the house altogether! How dare you imply such a thing?' I was seething, and Frank, sitting up, reached out to try to soothe me.

'Don't you touch me!' I snapped. 'Just tell me – *do* you think, on the evidence of a strange man happening to glance up at my window, that I've had some flaming affair with one of my patients?'

Frank got out of bed and wrapped his arms around me. I stayed stiff as Lot's wife, but he persisted, caressing my hair and rubbing my shoulders in the way he knew I liked.

'No, I don't think any such thing,' he said firmly. He pulled me closer and I relaxed slightly, though not enough to put my arms around him.

After a long time he murmured into my hair, 'No, I know you'd never do such a thing. I only meant to say that even if you ever did . . . Claire, it would make no difference to me. I love you so. Nothing you ever did could stop my loving you.' He took my face between his hands – only four inches taller than I, he could look directly into my eyes without trouble – and said softly, 'Forgive me?' His breath, barely scented with the tang of whisky, was warm on my face, and his lips, full and inviting, were disturbingly close.

Another rumble of thunder heralded the sudden breaking of the storm, and a thundering rain smashed down on the slates of the roof.

I slowly put my arms around his waist.

'"The quality of mercy is not strained,"' I quoted. '"It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven . . ."'

Frank laughed and looked upwards; the overlapping

stains on the ceiling boded ill for the prospects of our sleeping dry all night.

‘If that’s a sample of your mercy,’ he said, ‘I’d hate to see your vengeance.’ The thunder went off like a mortar attack, as though in answer to his words, and we both laughed, at ease again.

It was only later, listening to his regular deep breathing beside me, that I began to wonder. As I had said, there was no evidence whatsoever to imply unfaithfulness on my part. *My* part. But six years, as he’d said, was a long time.

## Standing Stones

Mr Crook called for me, as arranged, promptly at seven the next morning.

‘So as we’ll catch the dew on the buttercups, eh, lass?’ he said, twinkling with elderly gallantry. He had brought a motorcycle of his own approximate vintage, on which to transport us into the countryside. The plant presses were tidily strapped to the sides of this enormous machine, like fenders on a tugboat. It was a leisurely ramble through the quiet countryside, made all the more quiet by contrast with the thunderous roar of Mr Crook’s cycle, suddenly throttled into silence. The old man did indeed know a lot about the local plants, I discovered. Not only where they were to be found but their medicinal uses, and how to prepare them. I wished I had brought a notebook to get it all down, but listened intently to the cracked old voice and did my best to commit the information to memory as I stowed our specimens in the heavy plant presses.

We stopped for a packed luncheon near the base of a curious flat-topped hill. Green as most of its neighbours, with the same rocky juts and crags, it had something different: a well-worn path leading up one side and disappearing abruptly behind an outcrop.

‘What’s up there?’ I asked, gesturing with a cheese and pickle sandwich. ‘It seems a difficult place for picnicking.’

‘Ah.’ Mr Crook glanced at the hill. ‘That’s Craigh na Dun, lass. I’d meant to show ye after our meal.’

‘Really? Is there something special about it?’

‘Oh, aye,’ he answered, but refused to elaborate further, merely saying that I’d see when I saw.

I had some fears about his ability to climb such a steep path, but these evaporated as I found myself panting in his



wake. At last Mr Crook extended a gnarled hand and pulled me up over the rim of the hill.

‘There it is.’ He waved a hand with a sort of proprietorial gesture.

‘Why, it’s a henge!’ I said, delighted. ‘A miniature henge!’

Because of the war it had been several years since I had last visited Salisbury Plain, but Frank and I had seen Stonehenge soon after we were married. Like the other tourists wandering awed among the huge standing stones we had gaped at the Altar Stone (‘where ancient Druid priests performed their dreadful human sacrifices,’ announced our sonorous cockney guide).

Out of the same passion for exactness that made Frank adjust his ties on the hanger so that the ends hung precisely so, we had even trekked around the circumference of the circle, pacing off the distance between the Z holes and the Y holes, and counting the lintels over the Sarsen Circle, the outermost ring of monstrous uprights.

Three hours later, we knew how many Y and Z holes there were (fifty-nine, if you care; I didn’t), but had no more clue to the purpose of the structure than had the dozens of amateur and professional archaeologists who had crawled over the site for the last five hundred years.

No lack of opinions, of course. Life among academics had taught me that a well-expressed opinion is usually better than a badly expressed fact, so far as professional advancement goes.

A temple. A burial ground. An astronomical observatory. A place of execution (hence the aptly named Slaughter Stone that lies to one side, half sunk in its own pit). An open-air market. I liked this last suggestion, visualizing Megalithic housewives strolling between the lintels, baskets on their arms, critically judging the glaze on the latest shipment of red-clay beakers and listening sceptically to the claims of stone-age bakers and vendors of deer-bone shovels and amber beads.

The only thing I could see against that hypothesis was the presence of bodies under the Altar Stone and cremated remains in the Z holes. Unless these were the hapless

remains of merchants accused of short-weighting the customers, it seemed a bit insanitary to be burying people in the marketplace.

There were no signs of burial in the miniature henge atop this hill. By miniature I mean only that the circle of standing stones was smaller than Stonehenge; each stone was still twice my own height, and massive in proportion.

I had heard from another guide at Stonehenge that these stone circles occur all over Britain and Europe – some in better repair than others, some differing slightly in orientation or form, all of purpose and origin unknown.

Mr Crook stood smiling benignly as I prowled among the stones, pausing now and then to touch one gently, as though my touch could make an impression on the monumental boulders.

Some of the standing stones were brindled, striped with dim colours. Others were speckled with flakes of mica that caught the sun with a cheerful shimmer. All of them were remarkably different from the clumps of native stone that thrust out of the bracken all around. Whoever built the stone circles, and for whatever purpose, thought it important enough to have quarried, shaped and transported special stone blocks for the erection of their testimonial. Shaped – how? Transported – how, and from what unimaginable distance?

‘My husband would be fascinated,’ I told Mr Crook, stopping to thank him for showing me the place and the plants. ‘I’ll bring him up to see it later.’ The gnarled old man gallantly offered me an arm at the top of the trail. I took it, deciding after one look down the precipitous decline that in spite of his age he was probably steadier on his pins than I was.

I swung down the road that afternoon towards the town, to fetch Frank from the manse. I happily breathed in that heady Highland mix of peat and evergreen, spiced here and there with woodsmoke and the tang of fried herring. Those houses near the road were nice. Some were newly painted and even the manse which must be at least a hundred years

old, sported fresh maroon trim around its sagging window frames.

The minister's housekeeper answered the door, a tall, stringy woman with three strands of artificial pearls round her neck. Hearing who I was, she welcomed me in and towed me down a long, narrow, dark hallway, lined with sepia engravings of people who may have been famous personages of their time, or cherished relatives of the present minister, but might as well have been the Royal Family, for all I could see of their features in the gloom.

By contrast the minister's study was blinding with light from the enormous windows that ran nearly from the ceiling to floor in one wall. An easel near the fireplace, bearing a half-finished oil of black cliffs against the evening sky, showed the reason for the windows, which must have been added long after the house was built.

Frank and a short, tubby man with a dog collar were cosily poring over a mass of tattered paper on the desk by the far wall. Frank barely looked up in greeting, but the minister politely left off his explanations and hurried over to clasp my hand, his round face beaming with sociable delight.

'Mrs Randall!' he said, pumping my hand heartily. 'How nice to see you again. And you've come just in time to hear the news!'

'News?' Casting an eye on the grubbiness and typeface of the papers on the desk, I calculated the date of the news in question as being around 1750. Not precisely stop-the-presses, then.

'Yes, indeed. We've been tracing your husband's ancestor, Jack Randall, through the army dispatches of the period.' The minister leaned close, speaking out of the side of his mouth like a gangster in an American film. 'I've, er, "borrowed" the original dispatches from the local Historical Society files. You'll be careful not to tell anyone?'

Amused, I agreed that I would not reveal his deadly secret, and looked about for a comfortable chair in which to receive the latest revelations from the eighteenth century. The wing chair nearest the windows looked suitable, but as

I reached to turn it towards the desk I discovered that it was already occupied. The inhabitant, a small boy with a shock of glossy black hair, was curled up in the depths of the chair, sound asleep.

‘Roger!’ The minister, coming to assist me, was as surprised as I. The boy, startled out of sleep, shot bolt upright, wide eyes the colour of moss.

‘Now what are you up to in here, you young scamp?’ the minister scolded affectionately. ‘Oh, fell asleep reading the comic papers again?’ He scooped up the pages and handed them to the lad. ‘Run along now, Roger, I have business with the Randalls. Oh, wait, I’ve forgotten to introduce you – Mrs Randall, this is my son, Roger.’

I was a bit surprised. If ever I’d seen a confirmed bachelor I would have thought the Reverend Mr Wakefield was it. Still, I took the politely proffered paw and shook it warmly, resisting the urge to wipe a certain residual stickiness on my skirt.

The Reverend Mr Wakefield looked fondly after the boy as he went off towards the kitchen.

‘My niece’s son, really,’ he confided. ‘Father shot down over the Channel, and mother killed in the Blitz, though, so I’ve taken him.’

‘How kind of you,’ I murmured, thinking of Uncle Lamb. He, too, had died in the Blitz, on his way to the British Museum, where he had been lecturing. Knowing him, I thought his main feeling would have been gratification that the bomb had not hit the museum.

‘Not at all, not at all.’ The minister flapped a hand in embarrassment. ‘Nice to have a bit of young life about the house. Now, do have a seat.’

Frank began talking even before I had set my handbag down. ‘The most amazing luck, Claire,’ he enthused, thumbing through the dog-eared pile. ‘The minister’s located a whole series of military dispatches that mention Jonathan Randall.’

‘Well, a good deal of the prominence seems to have been Captain Randall’s own doing,’ the minister observed, taking some of the papers from Frank. ‘He was in command of

the garrison at Fort William for four years or so, but he seems to have spent quite a bit of his time harassing the Scottish countryside on behalf of the Crown. This lot' – he gingerly separated a stack of papers and laid them on the desk – 'is reports of complaints lodged against the Captain by various families and estate holders, claiming everything from interference with their maidservants by the soldiers of the garrison to outright theft of horses, not to mention assorted instances of "insult", unspecified.'

I was amused. 'So you have the proverbial horse thief in your family tree?' I said to Frank.

He shrugged, unperturbed. 'He was what he was, and there's nothing I can do about it. I only want to find out. The complaints aren't all that odd, for that particular period; the English in general, and the army in particular, were rather notably unpopular throughout the Highlands. No, what's odd is that nothing ever seems to have come of the complaints, even the serious ones.'

The minister, unable to keep still for long, broke in. 'That's right. Not that officers then were held to anything like modern standards; they could do very much as they liked in minor matters. But this is odd. It's not that the complaints are investigated and dismissed; they're just never mentioned again. You know what I suspect, Randall? Your ancestor must have had a patron. Someone who could protect him from the censure of his superiors.'

Frank scratched his head, squinting at the dispatches. 'You could be right. Had to have been someone quite powerful, though. High up in the army hierarchy, perhaps, or another member of the nobility outside the army.'

'Yes, or possibly – ' The minister was interrupted in his theories by the entrance of Mrs Graham, the housekeeper.

'I've brought ye a wee bit of refreshment, gentlemen,' she announced, setting the tea tray firmly in the centre of the desk, from which the minister rescued his precious dispatches in the nick of time. She looked me over with a shrewd eye, assessing the twitching limbs and faint glaze over the eyeballs.

'I've brought but the two cups, for I thought perhaps

Mrs Randall would care to join me in the kitchen. I've a bit of – ' I didn't wait for the conclusion of her invitation, but leapt to my feet with alacrity. I could hear the theories breaking out again behind me as we pushed through the swinging door that led to the manse's kitchen.

The tea was hot and fragrant, with bits of leaf swirling through the liquid.

'Mmm,' I said, setting the cup down. 'It's been a long time since I tasted Earl Grey.'

Mrs Graham nodded, beaming at my pleasure in her refreshments. She had clearly gone to some trouble, laying out handmade lace doilies beneath the eggshell cups and providing real butter and jam with the scones.

'Aye, I save it special for the readings. Better than the Indian stuff, ye know.'

'Oh, you read tea leaves?' I asked, mildly amused. Nothing could be further from the popular conception of the gypsy fortune-teller than Mrs Graham, with her short, iron-grey perm and triple-stranded pearl choker. A swallow of tea ran visibly down the long, stringy neck and disappeared beneath the gleaming beads.

'Why, certainly I do, my dear. Just as my grandmother taught me, and her grandmother before her. Drink up your cup, and I'll see what you have there.'

She was silent for a long time, once in a while tilting the cup to catch the light, or rolling it slowly between lean palms to get a different angle.

She set the cup down carefully, as though afraid it might blow up in her face. The grooves on either side of her mouth had deepened, and her brows pressed together in what looked like puzzlement.

'Well,' she said finally. 'That's one of the stranger cups I've seen.'

'Oh?' I was still amused, but beginning to be curious. 'Am I going to meet a tall dark stranger, or journey across the sea?'

'Could be.' Mrs Graham had caught my ironic tone, and echoed it, smiling slightly. 'And could not. That's what's odd about your cup, my dear. Everything in it's contradic-

tory. There's the curved leaf for a journey, but it's crossed by the broken one that means staying put. And strangers there are, to be sure, several of them. And one of them's your husband, if I read the leaves aright.'

My amusement dissipated somewhat. After six years apart, my husband *was* still something of a stranger. Though I failed to see how a tea leaf could know it.

Mrs Graham's brow was still furrowed. 'Let me see your hand, child,' she said.

The hand holding mine was bony, but surprisingly warm. A scent of lavender water emanated from the neat parting of the grizzled head bent over my palm. She stared into my hand for quite a long time, now and then tracing one of the lines with a finger as though following a map whose roads all petered out in sandy washes and deserted wastes.

'Well, what is it?' I asked, trying to maintain a light air. 'Or is my fate too horrible to be revealed?'

Mrs Graham raised quizzical eyes and looked thoughtfully at my face, but retained her hold on my hand. She shook her head, pursing her lips.

'Oh no, my dear. It's not your fate is in your hand. Only the seed of it.' The birdlike head cocked to one side, considering. 'The lines in your hand change, ye know. At another point in your life, they may be quite different than they are now.'

'I didn't know that. I thought you were born with them, and that was that.' I was repressing an urge to jerk my hand away. 'What's the point of palm reading, then?' I didn't wish to sound rude, but I found this scrutiny a bit unsettling, especially following on the heels of that tea leaf reading. Mrs Graham smiled unexpectedly and folded my fingers closed over my palm.

'Why, the lines of your palm show what ye are, dear. That's why they change – or should. They don't, in some people; those unlucky enough never to change in themselves, but there are few like that.' She gave my folded hand a squeeze and patted it. 'I doubt that you're one of those. Your hand shows quite a lot of change already, for one so

young. That would likely be the war, of course,' she said, as though to herself.

I was curious again, and opened my palm voluntarily.

'What am I, then, according to my hand?'

Mrs Graham frowned, but did not pick up my hand again.

'I canna just say. It's odd, for most hands have a likeness to them. Mind, I'd no just say that it's "see one, you've seen them all", but it's often like that – there are patterns, you know.' She smiled suddenly, an oddly engaging grin, displaying very white and patently false teeth.

'That's how a fortune-teller works, you know. I do it for the church fête every year – or did, before the war; suppose I'll do it again now. But a girl comes into the tent – and there am I, done up in a turban with a peacock feather borrowed from Mr Donaldson, and "robes of oriental splendour" – that's the minister's dressing gown, all over peacocks it is and yellow as the sun – anyway, I look her over while I pretend to be watching her hand, and I see she's got her blouse cut down to her breakfast, cheap scent, and earrings down to her shoulders. I needn't have a crystal ball to be tellin' her she'll have a child before the next year's fête.' Mrs Graham paused, grey eyes alight with mischief. 'Though if the hand you're holding is bare, it's tactful to predict first that she'll marry soon.'

I laughed, and so did she. 'So you don't look at their hands at all, then?' I asked. 'Except to check for rings?'

She looked surprised. 'Oh, of course you do. It's just that you know ahead of time what you'll see. Generally.' She nodded at my open hand. 'But that is not a pattern I've seen before. The large thumb, now' – she did lean forward then and touch it lightly – 'that wouldn't change much. Means you're strong-minded and have a will not easily crossed.' She twinkled at me. 'Reckon your husband could have told ye that. Likewise about that one.' She pointed to the fleshy mound at the base of the thumb.

'What is it?'

'The Mount of Venus, it's called.' She pursed her thin lips primly together, though the corners turned irrepressibly



up. 'In a man, ye'd say it means he likes the lasses. For a woman, 'tis a bit different. To be polite about it, I'll make a bit of a prediction for you, and say your husband isna like to stray far from your bed.' She gave a surprisingly deep and bawdy chuckle, and I blushed slightly.

The elderly housekeeper pored over my hand again, stabbing a pointed forefinger here and there to mark her words.

'Now, there, a well-marked lifeline; you're in good health and likely to stay so. The lifeline's interrupted, meaning your life's changed markedly – well, that's true of us all, is it not? But yours is more chopped-up, like, than I usually see; all bits and pieces. And your marriage-line, now' – she shook her head again – 'it's divided; that's not unusual, means two marriages . . .'

My reaction was slight and immediately suppressed, but she caught the flicker and looked up at once. I thought she probably was quite a shrewd fortune-teller, at that. The grey head shook reassuringly at me.

'No, no, lass. It doesna mean anything's like to happen to your good man. It's only that if it did' – she emphasized the 'if' with a slight squeeze of my hand – 'you'd not be one to pine away and waste the rest of your life in mourning. What it means is, you're one of those can love again if your first love's-lost.'

She squinted nearsightedly at my palm, running a short, ridged nail gently down the deep marriage line. 'But most divided lines are broken – yours is forked.' She looked up with a roguish smile. 'Sure you're not a bigamist, on the quiet, like?'

I shook my head, laughing. 'No. When would I have the time?' Then I turned my hand, showing the outer edge.

'I've heard that small marks on the side of the hand indicate how many children you'll have?' My tone was casual, I hoped. The edge of my palm was disappointingly smooth.

Mrs Graham flicked a scornful hand at this idea.

'Pah! After ye've had a bairn or two, ye might show lines there. More like you'd have them on your face. Proves nothing at all beforehand.'

‘Oh, it doesn’t?’ I was foolishly relieved to hear this. I was going to ask whether the deep lines across the base of my wrist meant anything (a potential for suicide?) but we were interrupted at that point by the Reverend Mr Wakefield coming into the kitchen bearing the empty teacups. He set them on the draining board and began a loud and clumsy fumbling through the cupboard, obviously in hopes of provoking help.

Mrs Graham sprang to her feet to defend the sanctity of her kitchen and pushing the Reverend adroitly to one side, set about assembling sherry and biscuits on a tray for the study. He drew me to one side, safely out of the way.

‘Why don’t you come to the study and have sherry with me and your husband, Mrs Randall? We’ve made really the most gratifying discovery.’

I could see that in spite of outward composure he was bursting with the glee of whatever they had found, like a small boy with a toad in his pocket. Plainly I was going to have to go and read Captain Jonathan Randall’s laundry bill, his receipt for boot repairs or some document of similar fascination.

Frank was so absorbed in the tattered documents that he scarcely looked up when I entered the study. He reluctantly surrendered them to the minister’s podgy hands, and came round to stand behind him and peer over his shoulder, as though he could not bear to let the papers out of his sight for a moment.

‘Yes?’ I said politely, fingering the dirty bits of paper. ‘Ummm, yes, very interesting.’ In fact, the spidery handwriting was so faded and so ornate that it hardly seemed worth the trouble of deciphering it. One sheet, better preserved than the rest, had some sort of crest at the top.

‘The Duke of . . . Sandringham, is it?’ I asked, peering at the crest with its faded leopard couchant, and the printing below, more legible than the handwriting.

‘Yes, indeed,’ the minister said, beaming even more. ‘An extinct title, now, you know.’

I didn’t, but nodded intelligently, being no stranger to historians in the manic grip of discovery. It was seldom

necessary to do more than nod periodically, saying ‘Oh, really?’ or ‘How perfectly fascinating!’ at appropriate intervals.

After a certain amount of deferring back and forth between Frank and the minister, the latter won the honour of telling me about their discovery. Evidently, all this rubbish made it appear that Frank’s ancestor, the notorious Black Jack Randall, had not been merely a gallant soldier for the Crown, but a trusted – and secret – agent of the Duke of Sandringham.

‘Almost an agent provocateur, wouldn’t you say, Dr Randall?’ The minister graciously handed the ball back to Frank, who seized it and ran.

‘Yes, indeed. The language is very guarded, of course . . .’ He turned the pages gently with a scrubbed forefinger.

‘Oh, really?’ I said.

‘But it seems from this that Jonathan Randall was entrusted with the job of stirring up Jacobite sentiments, if any existed, among the prominent Scottish families in his area. The point being to smoke out any baronets and clan chieftains who might be harbouring secret sympathies in that direction. But that’s odd. Wasn’t Sandringham a suspected Jacobite himself?’ Frank turned to the minister, a frown of inquiry on his face. The minister’s smooth, bald head creased in an identical frown.

‘Why, yes, I believe you’re right. But wait, let’s check in Cameron’ – he made a dive for the bookshelf, crammed with calf-bound volumes – ‘he’s sure to mention Sandringham.’

‘How perfectly fascinating,’ I murmured, allowing my attention to wander to the huge notice board that filled one wall of the study from floor to ceiling.

It was covered with an amazing assortment of things; mostly papers of one sort or another, gas bills, correspondence, notices about the General Assembly, loose pages of novels, notes in the minister’s own hand, but also small items like keys, bottle caps and what appeared to be small car parts, attached with tacks and string.

I browsed idly through the miscellanea, keeping half an ear tuned to the argument going on behind me (the Duke

of Sandringham probably *was* a Jacobite, they decided). My attention was caught by a genealogical chart, tacked up with special care in a spot by itself, using four tacks, one to a corner. The top of the chart included names dated in the early seventeenth century. But it was the name at the bottom of the chart that had caught my eye: 'Roger W. (MacKenzie) Wakefield', it read.

'Excuse me,' I said, interrupting a final sputter of dispute as to whether the leopard in the Duke's crest had a lily in its paw, or was it meant to be a crocus? 'Is this your son's chart?'

'Eh? Oh, why yes, yes it is.' Distracted, the minister hurried over, beaming once more. He detached the chart tenderly from the board and laid it on the table in front of me.

'I didn't want him to forget his own family, you see,' he explained. 'It's quite an old lineage, back to the sixteen hundreds.' His stubby forefinger traced the line of descent almost reverently.

'I gave him my own name because it seemed more suitable, as he lives here, but I didn't want him to forget where he came from.' He made an apologetic grimace. 'I'm afraid my own family is nothing to boast of, genealogically. Ministers and curates, with the occasional bookseller thrown in for variety, and only traceable back to 1762 or so. Rather poor record-keeping, you know,' he said, wagging his head remorsefully over the lethargy of his ancestors.

It was growing late by the time we finally left the manse, with the minister promising to take the letters to town for copying first thing in the morning. Frank babbled happily of spies and Jacobites most of the way back to Mrs Baird's. Finally, though, he noticed my quietness.

'What is it, love?' he asked, taking my arm solicitously. 'Not feeling well?' This was asked with a mingled tone of concern and hope.

'No, I'm quite well. I was only thinking . . .' I hesitated, because we had discussed this matter before. 'I was thinking about Roger.'

'Roger?'

I gave a sigh of impatience. 'Really, Frank! You can be so . . . oblivious! Roger, the Reverend Mr Wakefield's son.'

'Oh. Yes, of course,' he said vaguely. 'Charming child. What about him?'

'Well . . . only that there are a lot of children like that. Orphaned, you know.'

He gave me a sharp look and shook his head.

'No, Claire. Really, I'd like to, but I've told you how I feel about adoption. It's just . . . I couldn't feel properly towards a child who's not . . . well, not of my blood. No doubt that's ridiculous and selfish of me, but there it is. Maybe I'll change my mind in time, but now . . .' We walked a few steps in a barbed silence. Suddenly he stopped and turned to me, gripping my hands.

'Claire,' he said huskily, 'I want *our* child. You're the most important thing in the world to me. I want you to be happy, above all else, but I want . . . well, I want to keep you to myself. I'm afraid a child from outside, one we had no real relationship with, would seem an intruder, and I'd resent it. But to be able to give you a child, see it grow in you . . . then I'd feel as though it were more an . . . extension of you, perhaps. And me. A real part of the family.' His eyes were wide, pleading.

'Yes, all right. I understand.' I was willing to abandon the topic – for now. I turned to go on walking but he reached out and took me in his arms.

'Claire. I love you.' The tenderness in his voice was overwhelming, and I leaned my head against his jacket, feeling his warmth and the strength of his arms around me.

'I love you too.' We stood locked together for a moment, swaying slightly in the wind that swept down the road. Suddenly Frank drew back a bit, smiling down at me.

'Besides,' he said softly, smoothing the windblown hair back from my face, 'we haven't given up yet, have we?'

I smiled back. 'No.'

He took my hand, tucking it snugly beneath his elbow, and we turned towards our lodgings.

'Game for another try?'

'Yes. Why not?' We strolled, hand in hand, back towards

the Gereside Road. It was the sight of the Clach Mhor, the Pictish stone that stands at the corner of the road there, that made me remember things ancient.

'I forgot!' I exclaimed. 'I have something exciting to show you.' Frank looked down at me and pulled me closer. He squeezed my hand.

'So have I,' he said, grinning. 'You can show me yours tomorrow.'

When tomorrow came, though, we had other things to do. I had forgotten that we had planned a day trip to the Great Glen and Loch Ness. It was after nine when we arrived at Lochend and the guide Frank had called for was awaiting us on the edge of the loch with a small sailing skiff.

'An' it suits ye, sir, I thought we'd take a wee sail down the loch-side to Urquhart Castle. Perhaps we'll have a wee bit and sup there, before goin' on.' The guide, a dour-looking little man in weather-beaten cotton shirt and twill trousers, stowed the picnic hamper tidily beneath the seat and offered me a calloused hand down into the well of the boat.

It was a beautiful day, with the burgeoning greenery of the steep banks blurring in the ruffled surface of the loch. Our guide, despite his dour appearance, was knowledgeable and talkative, pointing out the landmarks that rimmed the long, narrow loch.

'Yonder, that's Urquhart Castle.' He pointed to a picturesque stone ruin above the loch. 'Or what's left of it. 'Twas cursed by the witches of the Glen, and saw one unhappiness after another.'

He told us the story of Mary Grant, daughter of the laird of Urquhart Castle, and her lover, Donald Donn, poet son of MacDonald of Bohuntin. Forbidden to meet because of her father's objection to the latter's habits of lifting any cattle he came across (an old and honourable Highland profession, the guide assured us), they met anyway. The father got wind of it, Donald was lured to a false rendezvous and thus taken. Condemned to die, he begged to be beheaded like a gentleman, rather than hanged as a felon.

This request was granted, and the young man led to the block, repeating 'The Devil will take the Laird of Grant out of his shoes, and Donald Donn shall not be hanged'. He wasn't, and legend reports that as his severed head rolled from the block, it spoke, saying, 'Mary, lift ye my head'.

I shuddered, and Frank put an arm around me. 'There's a bit of one of his poems left,' he said quietly. 'Donald Donn's. It goes:

Tomorrow I shall be on a hill, without a head.  
Have you no compassion for my sorrowful maiden,  
My Mary, the fair and tender-eyed?

I took his hand and squeezed it lightly.

As story after story of treachery, murder and violence was recounted, it seemed as though the loch had earned its sinister reputation.

'What about the monster?' I asked, peering over the side into the murky depths. It seemed entirely appropriate to such a setting.

Our guide shrugged and spat into the water.

'Weel, the loch's queer, and no mistake. There's stories, to be sure, of something old and evil that once lived in the depths. Sacrifices were made to it – kine, and sometimes even wee bairns, flung into the water in withy baskets.' He spat again. 'And some say the loch's bottomless – got a hole in the centre deeper than anything else in Scotland. On the other hand' – the guide's crinkled eyes crinkled a bit more – 'twas a family here from Lancashire a few years ago, cam' rushin' to the police station in Fort Augustus, screamin' as they'd seen the monster come out o' the water and hide in the bracken. Said 'twas a terrible creature, covered wi' red hair and fearsome horns, and chewin' something, wi' the blood all dripping from its mouth.' He held up a hand, stemming my horrified exclamation.

'The constable they sent to see cam' back and said, weel, bar the drippin' blood, 'twas a verra accurate description' –

he paused for effect – ‘of a nice Highland cow, chewin’ her cud in the bracken!’

We sailed down half the length of the loch before disembarking for a late lunch. We met the car there and motored back through the Glen, observing nothing more sinister than a fox in the road, who looked up startled, a small animal of some sort hanging limp in its jaws, as we zoomed around a curve. It leaped for the side of the road and swarmed up the bank, swift as a shadow.

It was very late indeed when we finally staggered up the path to Mrs Baird’s, but we clung together on the doorstep as Frank groped for the key, still laughing over the events of the day.

It wasn’t until we were undressing for bed that I remembered to mention the miniature henge on Craigh na Dun to Frank. His fatigue vanished at once.

‘Really? And you know where it is? How marvellous, Claire!’ He beamed and began rattling through his suitcase.

‘What are you looking for?’

‘The alarm clock,’ he replied, hauling it out.

‘Whatever for?’ I asked in astonishment.

‘I want to be up in time to see them.’

‘Who?’

‘The witches.’

‘Witches? Who told you there are witches?’

‘The minister,’ Frank answered, clearly enjoying the joke. ‘His housekeeper’s one of them.’

I thought of the dignified Mrs Graham and snorted derisively.

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’

‘Well, not witches, actually. There have been witches all over Scotland for hundreds of years – they burnt them till well into the eighteenth century – but this lot are really meant to be Druids, or something of the sort. I don’t suppose it’s actually a coven – not devil-worship, I don’t mean. But the minister said there was a local group that still observes rituals on the old sun-feast days. He can’t afford to take too much interest in such goings-on, you see, because of his position, but he’s much too curious a man



to ignore it altogether, either. He didn't know where the ceremonies took place, but if there's a stone circle nearby, that must be it.' He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. 'What luck!'

Getting up once in the dark to go adventuring is a lark. Twice in two days smacks of masochism.

No nice warm car with rugs and Thermoses this time, either. I stumbled sleepily up the hill behind Frank, tripping over roots and stubbing my toes on stones. It was cold and misty, and I dug my hands deeper into the pockets of my cardigan.

One final push up over the crest of the hill, and the henge was before us, the stones barely visible in the sombre light of pre-dawn. Frank stood stock-still, admiring them, while I subsided on to a convenient rock, panting.

'Beautiful,' he murmured. He crept silently to the outer edge of the ring, his shadowy figure disappearing among the larger shadows of the stones. Beautiful they were, and bloody eerie too. I shivered, and not entirely from the cold. If whoever had made them had meant them to impress, they'd known what they were doing.

Frank was back in a moment. 'No one here yet,' he whispered suddenly from behind me, making me jump. 'Come on, I've found a place we can watch from.'

The light was coming up from the east now, just a tinge of paler grey on the horizon, but enough to keep me from stumbling as Frank led me through a gap he had found in some alder bushes near the top of the path. There was a tiny clearing inside the clump of bushes, barely enough for the two of us to stand shoulder to shoulder. The path was clearly visible, though, and so was the interior of the stone circle, no more than twenty feet away. Not for the first time I wondered just what kind of work Frank had done during the war. He certainly seemed to know a lot about manoeuvring soundlessly in the dark.

Drowsy as I was, I wanted nothing more than to curl up under a cosy bush and go back to sleep. There wasn't room for that, though, so I continued to stand, peering down the

steep path in search of oncoming Druids. I was getting a crick in my back and my feet ached, but it couldn't take long; the streak of light in the east had turned a pale pink, and I supposed it was less than half an hour till dawn.

The first one moved almost as silently as Frank. There was only the faintest of rattles as her feet dislodged a pebble near the crest of the hill, and then the neat grey head rose silently into sight. Mrs Graham. So it was true, then. The minister's housekeeper was sensibly dressed in tweed skirt and woolly coat, with a white bundle under one arm. She disappeared behind one of the standing stones, quiet as a ghost.

They came quite quickly after that, in ones and twos and threes, with subdued giggles and whispers on the path that were quickly shushed as they came into sight of the circle.

I recognized a few. Here came Mrs Buchanan, the post-mistress, blonde hair freshly permed and the scent of Evening in Paris wafting strongly from its waves. I suppressed a laugh. So this was a modern-day Druid!

There were fifteen in all, and all women, ranging in age from Mrs Graham's sixty-odd years to a young woman in her early twenties, whom I had seen pushing a pram round the shops two days before. All of them were dressed for rough walking, with bundles beneath their arms. With a minimum of chat they disappeared behind stones or bushes, emerging empty-handed and bare-armed, completely clad in white. I caught the scent of laundry soap as one brushed by our clump of bushes, and recognized the garments as bedsheets, wrapped about the body and knotted at the shoulder.

They assembled outside the ring of stones, in a line from eldest to youngest, and stood in silence, waiting. The light in the east grew stronger and the line of women began to move, walking slowly between two of the stones. The leader took them directly to the centre of the circle and led them round and round, still moving slowly, stately as swans in a circular procession.

The leader suddenly stopped, raised her arms and stepped into the centre of the circle. Raising her face towards

the pair of easternmost stones, she called out in a high voice. Not loud, but clear enough to be heard throughout the circle. The still mist caught the words and made them echo as though they came from all around, from the stones themselves.

Whatever the call was, it was echoed again by the dancers. For dancers they now became. Not touching, but with arms outstretched towards each other, they bobbed and weaved, still moving in a circle. Suddenly the circle split in half. Seven of the dancers moved clockwise, still in a circular motion. The others moved in the opposite direction. The two semicircles passed each other at increasing speeds, sometimes forming a complete circle, sometimes a double line. And in the centre, the leader stood stock-still, giving again and again that mournful high-pitched call, in a language long since dead.

They should have been ridiculous, and perhaps they were. A collection of women in bedsheets, many of them stout and far from agile, parading in circles on top of a hill. But the hair prickled on the back of my neck at the sound of their call.

They stopped as one and turned to face the rising sun, standing in the form of two semicircles with a path lying clear between the halves of the circle thus formed. As the sun rose above the horizon its light flooded between the eastern stones, knifed between the halves of the circle and struck the great split stone on the opposite side of the henge.

The dancers stood for a moment, frozen in the shadows to either side of the beam of light. Then Mrs Graham said something in the same strange language, but this time in a speaking voice. She pivoted and walked, back straight, iron-grey waves glinting in the sun, along the path of light. Without a word the dancers fell in step behind her. They passed one by one through the cleft in the main stone and disappeared in silence.

We crouched in the alders until the women, now laughing and chatting normally, had retrieved their clothes and set off in a group down the hill, headed for coffee at the manse.

'Goodness!' I stretched, trying to get the kinks out of my legs and back. 'That was quite a sight, wasn't it?'

'Wonderful!' enthused Frank. 'I wouldn't have missed it for the world.' He slipped out of the bush like a snake, leaving me to disentangle myself while he cast about the interior of the circle, nose to the ground like a bloodhound.

'Whatever are you looking for?' I asked. I entered the circle with some hesitation, but day was fully come and the stones, while still impressive, had lost a good deal of the brooding menace of dawn light.

'Marks,' he replied, crawling about on hands and knees, eyes intent on the short turf. 'How did they know where to start and stop?'

'Good question. I don't see anything.' Casting an eye over the ground, though, I did see an interesting plant growing near the base of one of the tall stones. *Myosotis*? No, probably not; this had orange centres to the deep blue flowers. Intrigued, I started towards it. Frank, with keener hearing than I, leaped to his feet and seized my arm, hurrying me out of the circle a moment before one of the morning's dancers entered from the other side.

It was Miss Grant, the tubby little woman who, suitably enough in view of her figure, ran the sweets and pastries shop in the High Street. She peered nearsightedly around, then fumbled in her pocket for her spectacles. Jamming these on her nose, she strolled about the circle, at last pouncing on the lost hair-clip for which she had returned. Having restored it to its place in her thick, glossy locks, she seemed in no hurry to return to business. Instead she seated herself on a boulder, leaned back against one of the stone giants in comradely fashion and lighted a leisurely cigarette.

Frank gave a muted sigh of exasperation beside me. 'Well,' he said, resigned, 'we'd best go. She could sit there all morning, by the looks of her. And I didn't see any obvious markings in any case.'

'Perhaps we could come back later,' I suggested, still curious about the blue-flowered plant.

'Yes, all right.' But he had plainly lost interest in the circle itself, being now absorbed in the details of the cere-

mony. He quizzed me relentlessly on the way down the path, urging me to remember as closely as I could the exact wording of the calls and the timing of the dance.

‘Norse,’ he said at last, with satisfaction. ‘The root words are Ancient Norse, I’m almost sure of it. But the dance –’ He shook his head, pondering. ‘No, the dance is very much older. Not that there aren’t Viking circle dances,’ he said, raising his brows censoriously as though I had suggested there weren’t. ‘But that shifting pattern with the double-line business, that’s . . . hmm, it’s like . . . well, some of the patterns on the Beaker Folk glazeware show a pattern rather like that, but then again . . . hmm.’

He dropped into one of his scholarly trances, muttering to himself from time to time. The trance was broken only when he stumbled unexpectedly over an obstacle near the bottom of the hill. He flung his arms out with a startled cry as his feet went out from under him and he rolled untidily down the last few feet of the path, fetching up a clump of cow parsley.

I dashed down the hill after him but found him already sitting up among the quivering stems by the time I reached the bottom.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked, though I could see that he was.

‘I think so.’ He passed a hand dazedly over his brow, smoothing back the dark hair. ‘What did I trip over?’

‘This.’ I held up a sardine tin, discarded by some earlier visitor. ‘One of the menaces of civilization.’

‘Ah.’ He took it from me, peered inside, then tossed it over one shoulder. ‘Pity it’s empty. I’m feeling rather hungry after that excursion. Shall we see what Mrs Baird can provide in the way of a late breakfast?’

‘We might,’ I said, smoothing the last strands of hair for him. ‘And then again, we might make it an early lunch instead.’ My eyes met his.

‘Ah,’ he said again, with a completely different tone. He ran a hand slowly up my arm and up the side of my neck, his thumb gently tickling the lobe of my ear. ‘So we might.’

‘If you aren’t too hungry,’ I said. The other hand found its way behind my back. Palm spread, it pressed me gently towards him, fingers stroking lower and lower. His mouth opened slightly and he breathed, ever so lightly, down the neck of my dress, his warm breath tickling the tops of my breasts.

He laid me carefully back in the grass, the feathery blossoms of the cow parsley seeming to float in the air around his head. He bent forward and kissed me softly, and kept on kissing me as he unbuttoned my dress, one button at a time, teasing, pausing to reach a hand inside and play with the swelling tips of my breasts. At last he had the dress laid open from neck to waist.

‘Ah,’ he said again, in yet another tone. ‘Like white velvet.’ He spoke hoarsely, and his hair had fallen forward again, but he made no attempt to brush it back.

He sprang the clasp of my brassiere with one accomplished flick of the thumb, and bent to pay a skilled homage to my breasts. Then he drew back, and cupping my breasts with both hands, drew his palms slowly down to meet between the rising mounds, and without stopping drew them softly outwards again, tracing the line of my rib cage clear to the back. Up and again, down and around, until I moaned and turned towards him. He sank his lips on to mine and pressed me towards him until our hips fitted tightly together. He bent his head to mine, nibbling softly around the rim of my ear.

The hand stroking my back slipped lower and lower, stopping suddenly in surprise. It felt again, then Frank raised his head and looked down at me, grinning.

‘What’s all this, then?’ he asked, in imitation of a village bobby. ‘Or rather, what’s *not* all this?’

‘Just being prepared,’ I said primly. ‘Nurses are taught to anticipate contingencies.’

‘Really, Claire,’ he murmured, sliding his hand under my skirt and up my thigh to the soft, unprotected warmth between my legs, ‘you are the most terrifyingly practical person I have ever known.’

\*

Frank came up behind me as I sat in the parlour chair that evening, a large book spread out on my lap.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked. His hands rested gently on my shoulders.

‘Looking for that plant,’ I answered, sticking a finger between the pages to mind my place. ‘The one I saw in the stone circle. See...’ I flipped the book open. ‘It could be in the Gentianaceae, the Polemoniaceae, the Boraginaceae – that’s most likely, I think, forget-me-nots – but it could even be a variant of this one, the *Anemone patens*.’ I pointed out a full-colour illustration of a Pasque flower. ‘I don’t think it was a gentian of any kind; the petals weren’t really rounded, but –’

‘Well, why not go back and get it?’ he suggested. ‘Mr Crook would lend you his old banger, perhaps, or – no, I’ve a better idea. Borrow Mrs Baird’s bicycle, it’s safer. It’s a short walk from the road to the foot of the hill.’

‘And then about a thousand yards, straight up,’ I said. ‘Why are you so interested in that plant?’ I swivelled around to look up at him. The parlour lamp outlined his head with a thin gold line, like a medieval engraving of a saint.

‘It’s not the plant I care about. But if you’re going up there anyway, I wish you’d have a quick look around the outside of the stone circle.’

‘All right,’ I said obligingly. ‘What for?’

‘Traces of fire,’ he said. ‘In all the things I’ve been able to read about Beltane, fire is always mentioned in the rituals, yet the women we saw this morning weren’t using any. I wondered if perhaps they’d set the Beltane fire the night before, then come back in the morning for the dance. Though historically it’s the cowherds who were supposed to set the fire. There wasn’t any trace of fire inside the circle,’ he added. ‘But we left before I thought of checking the outside.’

‘All right,’ I said again, and yawned. Two early risings in two days were taking their toll. I shut the book and stood up. ‘Provided I don’t have to get up before nine.’

It was in fact nearly eleven before I reached the stone circle. It was drizzling and I was soaked through, not having

thought to bring a mac. I made a cursory examination of the outside of the circle, but if there had ever been a fire there, someone had taken pains to remove its traces.

The plant was easier to find. It was where I remembered it, near the foot of the tallest stone. I took several clippings of the plant and stowed them temporarily in my handkerchief, meaning to deal with them properly when I got back to Mrs Baird's bicycle, where I had left the plant press.

The tallest stone of the circle was cleft, with a vertical split dividing the two massive pieces. Oddly, the pieces had been drawn apart by some means. Though you could see that the facing surfaces matched, they were separated by a gap of two or three feet.

There was a deep humming noise coming from somewhere near at hand. I thought there might be a beehive lodged in some crevice of the rock, and placed a hand on the stone in order to lean into the cleft.

The stone screamed.

I backed away as fast as I could, moving so quickly that I tripped on the short turf and sat down hard. I stared at the stone, sweating.

I had never heard such a sound from anything living. There is no way to describe it, except to say that it was the sort of scream you might expect from a stone. It was horrible.

The other stones began to shout. There was a noise of battle, and the cries of dying men and shattered horses.

I shook my head violently to clear it, but the noise went on. I stumbled to my feet and staggered towards the edge of the circle. The sounds were all around me, making my teeth ache and my head spin. My vision began to blur.

I do not know now whether I went deliberately towards the cleft in the main stone, or whether it was accidental, a blind drifting through the fog of noise.

Once, travelling at night, I fell asleep in the passenger seat of a moving car, lulled by the noise and motion into an illusion of serene weightlessness. The driver of the car took a bridge too fast and lost control, and I woke from my floating dream straight into the glare of headlights and the



sickening sensation of falling at high speed. That abrupt transition is as close as I can come to describing the feeling I experienced, but it falls woefully short.

I could say that my field of vision contracted to a single dark spot, then disappeared altogether, leaving not darkness but a bright void. I could say that I felt as though I were spinning, or as though I were being pulled inside out. All these things are true, yet none of them conveys the sense I had of complete disruption, of being slammed very hard against something that wasn't there.

The truth is that nothing moved, nothing changed, nothing whatever appeared to *happen* and yet I experienced a feeling of elemental terror so great that I lost all sense of who or what or where I was. I was in the heart of chaos, and no power of mind or body was of use against it.

I cannot really say I lost consciousness, but I was certainly not aware of myself for some time. I 'woke', if that's the word, when I stumbled on a rock near the bottom of the hill. I half slid the remaining few feet and fetched up on the thick tufted grass at the foot.

I felt sick and dizzy. I crawled towards a stand of saplings and leaned against one to steady myself. There was a confused noise of shouting nearby, which reminded me of the sounds I had heard, and felt, in the stone circle. The ring of inhuman violence was lacking, though; this was the normal sound of human conflict, and I turned towards it.

## The Man in the Wood

The men were some distance away when I saw them. Two or three, dressed in kilts, running like the dickens across a small clearing. There was a far-off banging noise that I rather dazedly identified as gunshots. I was quite sure I was still hallucinating when the sound of shots was followed by the appearance of five or six men dressed in red coats and knee breeches, waving muskets. I blinked and stared. I moved my hand before my face and held up two fingers. I saw two fingers, all present and correct. No blurring of vision. I sniffed the air cautiously. The pungent odour of trees in spring and a faint whiff of clover from a clump near my feet. No olfactory delusions.

I felt my head. No soreness anywhere. Concussion unlikely then. Pulse a little fast, but steady.

The sound of distant yelling changed abruptly. There was a thunder of hooves, and several ponies came charging in my direction, kilted Scots atop them, yodelling in Gaelic. I dodged out of the way with an agility that seemed to prove I had not been physically damaged, whatever my mental state.

And then it came to me, as one of the redcoats, knocked flat by a fleeing Scot, rose and shook his fist theatrically after the ponies. Of course. A film! I shook my head at my own slowness. They were shooting a costume drama of some sort, that was all. One of those Bonnie-Prince-in-the-heather sorts of things, no doubt.

Well. Regardless of artistic merit, the film crew wouldn't thank me for introducing a note of historic inauthenticity into their shots. I doubled back into the wood, meaning to make a wide circle around the clearing and come out on the road where I had left the bike. The going was more

difficult than I had expected, though. The wood was a young one, and dense with underbrush that snagged my clothes. I had to go carefully through the spindly saplings, disentangling my skirts from brambles as I went.

Had he been a snake I would have stepped on him. He stood so quietly among the saplings as almost to have been one of them, and I did not see him until a hand shot out and gripped me by the arm.

Its companion clapped over my mouth as I was dragged backwards into a grove, thrashing wildly in panic. My captor, whoever he was, seemed not much taller than I, but rather noticeably strong in the forearms. I smelled a faint flowery scent, as of lavender water, and something more spicy, mingled with the sharper reek of male perspiration. As the leaves whipped back into place in the path of our passage, though, I noticed something familiar about the hand and forearm clasped about my waist.

I shook my head free of the restraint over my mouth.

'Frank!' I burst out. 'What in heaven's name are you playing at?' I was torn between relief at finding him here and irritation at the horseplay. Unsettled as I was by my experience among the stones, I was in no mood for rough games.

The hands released me, but even as I turned to him I sensed something wrong. It was not only the unfamiliar cologne but something more subtle. I stood stock-still, feeling the hair prickle on my neck.

'You aren't Frank,' I whispered.

'I am not,' he agreed, surveying me with considerable interest. 'Though I've a cousin of that name. I doubt, though, that it's he you have confused me with, madam. We do not resemble one another greatly.'

Whatever this man's cousin looked like, the man himself might have been Frank's brother. There was the same lithe, spare build and fine-drawn bones; the same chiselled lines of the face; the level brows and wide hazel eyes; and the same dark hair, curved smooth across the brow.

But this man's hair was long, tied back from his face with a leather thong. And the gypsy skin showed the deep-baked

tan of months, no, years of exposure to the weather, not the light golden colour Frank's had attained during our Scottish holiday.

'Just who are you?' I demanded, feeling most uneasy. While Frank had numerous relatives and connections, I thought I knew all the British branch of the family. Certainly there was no one who looked like this man among them. And surely Frank would have mentioned any near relative living in the Highlands? Not only mentioned him but insisted upon visiting him as well, armed with the usual collection of genealogical charts and notebooks, eager for any tidbits of family history about the famous Black Jack Randall.

The stranger raised his brows at my question.

'Who am I? I might ask the same question, madam, and with considerably more justification.' His eyes raked me slowly from head to toe, travelling with a sort of insolent appreciation over the thin sprigged cotton dress I wore, and lingering with an odd look of amusement on my legs. I did not at all understand the look, but it made me extremely nervous, and I backed up a step or two until I was brought up sharp by bumping into a tree.

The man finally removed his gaze and turned aside. It was as though he had taken a constraining hand off me, and I let out my breath in relief, not realizing until then that I had been holding it.

He had turned to pick up his coat, thrown across the lowest branch of a sapling. He brushed some scattered leaves from it and began to put it on.

I must have gasped, because he looked up again. The coat was deep scarlet, long-tailed and without lapels, frogged down the front. The buff linings of the turned-back cuffs extended a good six inches up the sleeve, and a small coil of gold braid gleamed from one epaulette. It was a dragoon's coat, an officer's coat. Then it occurred to me – of course, he was an actor, from the company I had seen on the other side of the wood. Though the sword he proceeded to strap on seemed remarkably more realistic than any prop I had ever seen.

I pressed myself against the bark of the tree behind me and found it reassuringly solid. I crossed my arms protectively in front of me.

‘Who the bloody hell are you?’ I demanded again. The question this time came out in a croak that sounded frightened even to my ears.

As though not hearing me, he ignored the question, taking his time in the fastening of the frogs down the front of his coat. Only when he finished did he turn his attention to me once more. He bowed sardonically, hand over his heart.

‘I am, madam, Jonathan Randall, Esquire, Captain of His Majesty’s Eighth Dragoons. At your service, madam.’

I broke and ran. My breath rasped in my chest as I tore through the screen of alder, ignoring brambles, nettles, stones, fallen logs, everything in my path. I heard a shout behind me but was much too panicked to determine its direction.

I fled blindly, branches scratching my face and arms, ankles turning as I stepped in holes and stumbled on rocks. I had no room in my mind for any form of rational thought; I wanted only to get away from him.

A heavy weight struck me hard in the lower back and I pitched forward at full length, landing with a thud that knocked the wind out of me. Rough hands flipped me on to my back, and Captain Jonathan Randall rose to his knees above me. He was breathing heavily and had lost his sword in the chase. He looked dishevelled, dirty and thoroughly annoyed.

‘What the devil do you mean by running away like that?’ he demanded. A thick lock of dark brown hair had come loose and curved across his brow, making him look even more disconcertingly like Frank.

He leaned down and grasped me by the arms. Still gasping for breath, I struggled to get free but succeeded only in dragging him down on top of me.

He lost his balance and collapsed at full length on me, flattening me once more. Surprisingly enough, this seemed to make his annoyance vanish.

‘Oh, like that, is it?’ he said, with a chuckle. ‘Well, I’d be most willing to oblige you, Chuckie, but it happens you’ve chosen a rather inopportune moment.’ His weight pressed my hips to the ground and a small rock was digging painfully into the small of my back. I squirmed to dislodge it. He ground his hips hard against mine and his hands pinned my shoulders to the earth. My mouth fell open in outrage.

‘What do you . . .’ I began, but he ducked his head and kissed me, cutting short my expostulations. His tongue thrust into my mouth and explored me with a bold familiarity, roving and plunging, retreating and lunging again. Then, just as suddenly as he had begun, he pulled back.

He patted my cheek. ‘Quite nice, Chuckie. Perhaps later, when I’ve the leisure to attend to you properly.’

I had by this time recovered my breath, and I used it. I screamed directly into his earhole, and he jerked as though I had run a hot wire into it. I took advantage of the movement to get my knee up, and jabbed it into his exposed side, sending him sprawling into the leaf mould.

I scrambled awkwardly to my feet. He rolled expertly and came up alongside me. I glanced wildly around, looking for a way out, but we were flush up against the foot of one of those towering cliffs that jut so abruptly from the soil of the Scottish Highlands. He had caught me at a point where the rock face broke inwards, forming a shallow stony box. He blocked the entrance to the declivity, arms spread and braced between the rock walls, an expression of mingled anger and curiosity on his handsome dark face.

‘Who were you with?’ he demanded. ‘Frank, whoever he is? I’ve no man by that name among my company. Or is it some man who lives nearby?’ He smiled derisively. ‘You haven’t the smell of dung on your skin, so you haven’t been with a cottar. For that matter, you look a bit more expensive than the local farmers could afford.’

I clenched my fists and set my chin. Whatever this joker had in mind, I was having none of it.

‘I haven’t the faintest idea what you are talking about, and I’ll thank you to let me pass at once!’ I said, adopting

my very best ward-sister's tone. This generally had a good effect on recalcitrant orderlies and junior doctors, but appeared merely to amuse Captain Randall. I was resolutely repressing the feelings of fear and disorientation that were flapping under my ribs like a panicked flock of hens.

He shook his head slowly, examining me once more in detail.

'Not just at present, Chuckie. I'm asking myself,' he said conversationally, 'just why a whore abroad in her shift would be wearing her shoes? And quite fine ones, at that,' he added, glancing at my plain brown flatties.

'A what!' I exclaimed.

He ignored me completely. His gaze had returned to my face, and he suddenly stepped forward and gripped my chin in his hand. I grabbed his wrist and yanked.

'Let go of me!' He had fingers like steel. Disregarding my efforts to free myself, he turned my face from one side to the other, so the fading afternoon light shone on it.

'The skin of a lady, I'll swear,' he murmured to himself. He leaned forward and sniffed. 'And a French scent in your hair.' He let go then, and I rubbed my jaw indignantly, as though to erase the touch I still felt on my skin.

'The rest might be managed with money from your patron,' he mused, 'but you've the speech of a lady too.'

'Thanks so much!' I snapped. 'Get out of my way. My husband is expecting me; if I'm not back in ten minutes, he'll come looking for me.'

'Oh, your husband?' The derisively admiring expression retreated somewhat, but did not disappear completely. 'And what is your husband's name, pray? Where is he? And why does he allow his wife to wander alone through deserted woods in a state of undress?'

I had been throttling that part of my brain that was beating itself to pieces trying to make sense of the whole afternoon. It now managed to break through long enough to tell me that however absurd I thought its conjectures, giving this man Frank's name, the same as his own, was only likely to lead to further trouble. Disdaining therefore to answer him, I made to push past him. He blocked my

passage with a muscular arm and reached for me with his other hand.

There was a sudden whoosh from above, followed immediately by a blur before my eyes and a dull thud. Captain Randall was on the ground at my feet, under a heaving mass that looked like a bundle of old tartan rags. A brown rocklike fist rose out of the mass and descended with considerable force, meeting decisively with some bony protuberance, by the sound of the resultant crack. The Captain's struggling legs, shiny in tall brown boots, relaxed quite suddenly.

I found myself staring into a pair of sharp black eyes. The sinewy hand that had temporarily distracted the Captain's unwelcome attentions was attached like a limpet to my forearm.

'And who the hell are you?' I said in astonishment. My rescuer, if I cared to call him that, was some inches shorter than I and sparely built, but the bare arms protruding from the ragged shirt were knotted with muscle and his whole frame gave the impression of being made of some resilient material such as bedsprings. No beauty, either, with a pock-marked skin, low brow and narrow jaw.

'This way.' He jerked on my arm, and I, stupefied by the rush of recent events, obediently followed.

My new companion pushed his way rapidly through a scrim of alder, made an abrupt turn around a large rock, and suddenly we were on a path. Overgrown with gorse and heather, and zigzagging so that it was never visible for more than six feet ahead, it was still unmistakably a path, leading steeply up towards the crest of a hill.

Not until we were picking our way cautiously down the far side of the hill did I gather breath and wit enough to ask where we were going. Receiving no answer from my companion, I repeated 'Where on earth are we going?' in a louder tone.

To my considerable surprise he rounded on me, face contorted, and pushed me off the path. As I opened my mouth to protest he clapped a hand over it and dragged me to the ground, rolling on top of me.



Not again! I thought, and was heaving desperately to and fro to free myself when I heard what he had heard, and suddenly lay still. Voices called back and forth, accompanied by trampling and splashing sounds. They were unmistakably English voices. I struggled violently to get my mouth free. I sank my teeth into his hand, and had time only to register the fact that he had been eating pickled herring with his fingers, before something crashed against the back of my skull, and everything went dark.

The stone cottage loomed up suddenly through a haze of night mist. The shutters were bolted tight, showing no more than a thread of light. Having no idea how long I had been travelling, I couldn't tell how far this place was from the hill of Craigh na Dun or the town of Inverness. We were on horseback, myself mounted before my captor with hands tied to the pommel, but there was no road, so progress was still rather slow.

I thought I had not been out for long; I showed no symptoms of concussion or other ill effects from the blow, save a sore patch on the base of my skull. My captor, a man of few words, had responded to my questions, demands and acerbic remarks alike with the all-purpose Scottish noise which can best be rendered phonetically as 'Mmmphm'. Had I been in any doubt as to his nationality, that sound alone would have been sufficient to remove it.

My eyes had gradually adapted to the dwindling light as the pony stumbled through the stones and gorse, so it was a shock to step from near-dark into what seemed a blaze of light inside. As the dazzle receded I could see that in fact the single room was lit only by a fire, several candlesticks and a dangerously old-fashioned-looking oil lamp.

'What is it ye have there, Murtagh?'

The weasel-faced man grabbed me by the arm and urged me blinking into the firelight.

'A Sassenach wench, by her speech.' There were several men in the room, all apparently staring at me, some in curiosity, some with unmistakable leers. My dress had been torn in various spots during the afternoon's activities, and

I hastily took stock of the damage. Looking down, I could see the curve of one breast clearly through a rip, and I was sure the assembled men could too. I decided that making an attempt to pull the torn edges together would only draw further attention to the prospect; instead I chose a face at random and stared boldly at him, in hopes of distracting either the man or myself.

‘Eh, a bonny one, Sassenach or no,’ said the man, a fat, greasy sort with a black beard, seated by the fire. He was holding a chunk of bread and didn’t bother to set it down as he rose and came over to me. He pushed my chin up with the back of his hand, shoving the hair out of my face. A few breadcrumbs fell down the neck of my dress. The other men clustered close around, a mass of tartan and whiskers, smelling strongly of sweat and alcohol. It was only then that I saw they were all kilted – odd, even for this part of the Highlands. Had I stumbled into the meeting of a clan society, or perhaps a regimental reunion?

‘C’mere, lass.’ A large, dark-bearded man remained seated at the table by the window as he beckoned me. By his air of command, he seemed to be the leader of this pack. The men parted reluctantly as Murtagh pulled me forward, apparently respecting his rights as captor.

The dark man looked me over carefully, no expression on his face. He was good-looking, I thought, and not unfriendly. There were lines of strain between his brows, though, and it wasn’t a face one would willingly cross.

‘What’s your name, lass?’ His voice was light for a man of his size, not the deep bass I would have expected from the barrel chest.

‘Claire . . . Claire Beauchamp,’ I said, deciding on the spur of the moment to use my maiden name. If it were ransom they had in mind, I didn’t want to help them by giving a name that could lead to Frank. And I wasn’t sure I wanted these rough-looking men to know who I was, before I found out who they were. ‘And just what do you think you’re –’ The dark man ignored me, establishing a pattern that I was to grow tired of very quickly.

‘Beauchamp?’ The heavy brows lifted and the general

company stirred in surprise. 'A French name, it is, surely?' He had in fact pronounced the name in correct French, though I had given it the common English pronunciation of 'Beecham'.

'Yes, that's right,' I answered in some surprise.

'Where did ye find this lass?' he demanded, swinging round on Murtagh, who was refreshing himself from a leather flask.

The swarthy little man shrugged. 'At the foot o' Craigh na Dun, Dougal. She was havin' words with a certain captain of dragoons wi' whom I chanced to be acquaint', he added, with a significant lift of his eyebrows. 'There seemed to be some question as to whether the lady was or was not a whore.'

Dougal looked me over carefully once more, taking in every detail of cotton print dress and walking shoes.

'I see. And what was the lady's position in this discussion?' he inquired, with a sarcastic emphasis on the 'lady' that I didn't particularly care for. I noticed that while his Scots was less pronounced than that of the man called Murtagh, his accent was still broad enough that the word was almost, though not quite, 'leddy'.

Murtagh seemed grimly amused; at least one corner of the thin mouth turned up. 'She said she wasna. The Captain himself appeared to be of two minds on the matter, but inclined to put the question to the test.'

'We could do the same, come to that.' The fat, black-bearded man stepped towards me grinning, hands tugging at his belt. I backed up hastily as far as I could, which was not nearly far enough, given the dimensions of the cottage.

'That will do, Rupert.' Dougal was still scowling at me, but his voice held the ring of authority, and Rupert stopped his advances, making a comical face of disappointment.

'I don't hold wi' rape, and we've not the time for it, anyway.' I was pleased to hear this statement of policy, dubious as its moral underpinning might be, but remained a bit nervous in the face of the openly lascivious looks on some of the other faces. I felt absurdly as though I had appeared in public in my undergarments. And while I had

no idea who or what these Highland bandits were up to, they seemed bloody dangerous. I bit my tongue, repressing a number of more or less injudicious remarks that were bubbling towards the surface.

‘What d’ye say, Murtagh?’ Dougal demanded of my captor. ‘She doesna appear to care for Rupert, at least.’

‘That’s no proof,’ objected a short, squint-eyed man. ‘He didna offer her any siller. Ye canna expect any woman to take on something like Rupert without substantial payment – in advance,’ he added, to the considerable hilarity of his companions. Dougal stilled the racket with an abrupt gesture, though, and jerked his head towards the door. Squint-eye, still grinning, obediently slid out into the darkness.

Murtagh, who had not joined in the laughter, was frowning as he looked me over. He shook his head, making the lank fringe across his forehead sway.

‘Nay,’ he said definitely. ‘I’ve no idea what she might be – or who – but I’ll stake my best shirt she’s no whore.’ I hoped in that case that his best was not the one he was wearing, which scarcely looked worth the wagering.

‘Weel, ye’d know, Murtagh, ye’ve seen enough o’ them,’ glibed Rupert, but was gruffly hushed by Dougal.

‘We’ll puzzle it out later,’ said Dougal brusquely. ‘We’ve a good distance to go tonight, and we mun’ do something for Jamie first; he canna ride like that.’

I shrank back into the shadows near the fireplace, hoping to avoid notice. The man called Murtagh had untied my hands before leading me in here. Perhaps I could slip away while they were busy elsewhere. The men’s attention had shifted to a young man crouched on a stool in the corner. He had barely looked up through my appearance and interrogation but kept his head bent, hand clutching the opposite shoulder, rocking slightly back and forth in pain.

Dougal gently pushed the clutching hand away. One of the men pulled back the young man’s plaid, revealing a dirt-smeared linen shirt blotched with blood. A small man with a balding head came up behind the lad with a single-bladed knife, and holding the shirt at the collar, slit it across

the breast and down the sleeve, so that it fell away from the shoulder.

I gasped, as did several of the men. The shoulder had been wounded; there was a deep ragged furrow across the top, and blood was running freely down the young man's breast. But more shocking was the shoulder joint itself. A dreadful hump rose on that side, and the arm hung at an impossible angle.

Dougal grunted. 'Mmph. Out o' joint, poor bugger.' The young man looked up for the first time. Though drawn with pain and stubbled with red beard, it was a strong, good-humoured face.

'Fell wi' my hand out, when the musket ball knocked me off my saddle. I landed with all my weight on the hand, and *crunch!* there it went.'

'Crunch is right.' The bald man – a Scot, and educated, to judge by his accent – was probing the shoulder, making the lad grimace in pain. 'The wound's no trouble. The ball went right through, and it's clean – the blood's runnin' free enough.' The man picked up a wad of grimy cloth from the table and used it to blot the blood. 'I don't know quite what to do about the disjointment, though. We'd need a chirmurgeon to put it back in place properly. You canna ride with it that way, can you, Jamie lad?'

*Musket ball?* I thought blankly. *Chirmurgeon?*

The young man shook his head, white-faced. 'Hurts bad enough sitting still. I couldna manage a pony.' He squeezed his eyes shut and set his teeth in his lower lip.

Murtagh spoke impatiently. 'Well, we canna leave him behind noo, can we? The lobsterbacks are no great shakes trackin' in the dark, but they'll find this place sooner or later, shutters or no. And Jamie can hardly pass for an innocent cottar, wi' yon great hole in 'im.'

'Dinna worry yourself,' Dougal said shortly. 'I don't mean to be leaving him behind.'

The bald man sighed. 'No help for it, then. We'll have to try and force the joint back. Murtagh, you and Rupert hold him; I'll give it a try.'

I watched in sympathy as he picked up the young man's

arm by wrist and elbow and began forcing it upwards. The angle was quite wrong; it must be causing agonizing pain. Sweat poured down the young man's face but he made no sound beyond a soft groan. Suddenly he slumped forward, kept from falling on the floor only by the grip of the men holding him.

One unstopped a leather flask and pressed it to his lips. The reek of the raw spirit reached me where I stood. The young man coughed and gagged but swallowed nonetheless, dribbling the amber liquid on to the remains of his shirt.

'All right for another go, lad?' the bald man asked. 'Or maybe Rupert should have a try,' he suggested, turning to the squat, black-bearded ruffian.

Rupert, so invited, flexed his shoulders as though to toss a caber, and picked up the young man's wrist, plainly intending to put the joint back by main force; an operation, it was clear, which was likely to snap the arm like a broomstick.

'Don't you dare to do that!' All thought of escape submerged in professional outrage, I started forward, oblivious to the startled looks of the men around me.

'What do you mean?' snapped the bald man, clearly irritated by my intrusion.

'I mean that you'll break his arm if you do it like that,' I snapped back. 'Stand out of the way, please.' I elbowed Rupert back and took hold of the patient's wrist myself. The patient looked as surprised as the rest, but didn't resist. His skin was very warm, but not feverish, I judged.

'You have to get the bone of the upper arm at the proper angle before it will slip back into its joint,' I said, grunting as I pulled the wrist up and the elbow in. The young man was sizable; his arm was heavy as lead.

'This is the worst part,' I warned the patient. I cupped the elbow, ready to whip it upwards and in.

His mouth twitched, not quite a smile. 'It canna hurt much worse than it does. Get on wi' it.' Sweat was popping out on my own face by now. Resetting a shoulder joint is hard work at the best of times. Done on a large man who had gone hours since the dislocation, his muscles now swol-

len and pulling on the joint, the job was taking all the strength I had. The fire was dangerously close; I hoped we wouldn't both topple in, if the joint went back with a jerk.

Suddenly the shoulder gave a soft crunching *pop!* and the joint was back in place. The patient looked amazed. He put an unbelieving hand up to explore.

'It doesna hurt any more!' A broad grin of delighted relief spread across his face, and the men broke out in exclamations and applause.

'It will.' I was sweating from the exertion, but smugly pleased with the results. 'It will be tender for several days. You mustn't extend the joint at all for two or three days; when you do use it again, go very slowly at first. Stop at once if it begins to hurt, and use warm compresses on it daily.'

I became aware, in the midst of this advice, that while the patient was listening respectfully the other men were eyeing me with looks ranging from wonder to outright suspicion.

'I'm a nurse, you see,' I explained, feeling somehow defensive.

Dougal's eyes, and Rupert's as well, dropped to my bosom and fastened there with a sort of horrified fascination. They exchanged glances, then Dougal looked back at my face.

'Be that as it may,' he said, raising his brows at me. 'For a wetnurse, you'd seem to have some skill at healing. Can ye stanch the lad's wound, well enough for him to sit a horse?'

'I can dress the wound, yes,' I said with considerable asperity. 'Provided you've anything to dress it with. But just what do you mean by "wetnurse"? And why do you suppose I'd want to help you, anyway?'

I was ignored as Dougal turned and spoke in a tongue I dimly recognized as Gaelic to a woman who cowered in the corner. Surrounded by the mass of men, I had not noticed her before. She was dressed oddly, I thought, in a long, ragged skirt and a long-sleeved blouse half covered by a sort of bodice or jerkin. Everything was rather on the grubby

side, including her face. Glancing around, though, I could see that the cottage lacked not only electricity but also indoor plumbing; perhaps there was some excuse for the dirt.

The woman bobbed a quick curtsy, and scuttling past Rupert and Murtagh, she began digging in a painted wooden chest by the hearth, emerging finally with a pile of ratty cloths.

‘No, that won’t do,’ I said, fingering them gingerly. ‘The wound needs to be disinfected first, then bandaged with a clean cloth, if there are no sterile bandages.’

Eyebrows rose all round. ‘Disinfected?’ said the small man carefully.

‘Yes, indeed,’ I said firmly, thinking him a bit simpleminded, in spite of his educated accent. ‘All dirt must be removed from the wound and it must be treated with a compound to discourage germs and promote healing.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as iodine,’ I said. Seeing no comprehension on the faces before me, I tried again. ‘Dilute carbolic? Or perhaps even just alcohol?’ Looks of relief. At last I had found a word they appeared to recognize. Murtagh thrust the leather flask into my hands. I sighed with impatience. I knew the Highlands were primitive, but this was nearly unbelievable.

‘Look,’ I said, as patiently as I could. ‘Why don’t you just take him down into the town? It can’t be far, and I’m sure there’s a doctor there who could see to him.’

The woman gawped at me. ‘What town?’

The big man called Dougal was ignoring this discussion, peering cautiously into the darkness through the shutter’s crack. He stepped quietly to the door, and the men fell quiet as he vanished into the night.

In a moment he was back, bringing the squint-eyed man and the cold sharp scent of dark pines with him. He shook his head in answer to the men’s questioning looks.

‘Nay, nothing close. We’ll go at once, while it’s safe.’

Catching sight of me, he stopped for a moment, thinking. Suddenly he nodded at me, decision made.

‘She’ll come with us,’ he said. He rummaged in the pile



of cloths on the table and came up with a tattered rag; it looked like a neckcloth that had seen better days.

The bald man seemed disinclined to have me along, wherever they were going.

‘Why do ye no just leave her here?’

Dougal cast him an impatient glance, but left it to Murtagh to explain. ‘Wherever the redcoats are now, they’ll be here by dawn, which is no so far off, considering. If this woman’s an English spy, we canna risk leaving her here to tell them which way we’ve gone. And if she should not be on good terms wi’ them’ – he looked dubiously at me – ‘we certainly canna leave a lone woman here in her shift.’ He brightened a bit, fingering the fabric of my skirt. ‘She might be worth a bit in the way of ransom, at that; little as she has on, it’s fine stuff.’

‘Besides,’ Dougal added, interrupting, ‘she may be useful on the way; she seems to know a bit about doctoring. But we’ve no time for that now. I’m afraid ye’ll have to go without bein’ “disinfected”, Jamie,’ he said, clapping the younger man on the back. ‘Can ye ride one-handed?’

‘Aye.’

‘Good lad. Here,’ he said, tossing the greasy rag at me. ‘Bind up his wound, quickly. We’ll be leaving directly. Do you two get the ponies,’ he said, turning to weasel-face and the fat one called Rupert.

I turned the rag round distastefully.

‘I can’t use this,’ I complained. ‘It’s filthy.’

Without seeing him move, I found the big man gripping my shoulder, his hazel eyes an inch from mine. ‘Do it,’ he said.

Freeing me with a push, he strode to the door and disappeared after his two henchmen. Feeling more than a little shaken, I turned to the task of bandaging the musket wound as best I could. The thought of using the grimy neckrag was something my medical training wouldn’t let me contemplate. I tried to bury my confusion and terror in the task of trying to find something more suitable, and, after a quick and futile search through the pile of rags, finally settled on

strips of rayon torn from the hem of my slip. While hardly sterile, it was by far the cleanest material at hand.

The linen of my patient's shirt was old and worn, but still surprisingly tough. With a bit of a struggle I ripped the rest of the sleeve open and used it to improvise a sling. I stepped back to survey the results of my impromptu field dressing, and backed straight into the big man, who had come in quietly to watch.

He looked approvingly at my handiwork. 'Good job, lass. Come on, we're ready.'

Dougal handed a coin to the woman and hustled me out of the cottage, followed more slowly by Jamie, still a bit white-faced. Unfolded from the low stool, my patient proved to be quite tall; he stood several inches over Dougal, himself a tall man.

The black-bearded Rupert and Murtagh were holding six ponies outside, muttering soft Gaelic endearments to them in the dark. It was a moonless night, but the starlight caught the metal bits of the harness in flashes of quicksilver. I looked up and almost gasped in wonder; the night sky was thick with a glory of stars such as I had never seen. Glancing round at the surrounding forest, I understood. With no nearby city to veil the sky with light, the stars here held undisputed dominion over the night.

And then I stopped dead, feeling much colder than the night chill justified. No city lights. 'What town?' the woman inside had asked. Accustomed as I was to blackouts and air raids from the war years, the lack of light had not at first disturbed me. But this was peacetime, and the lights of Inverness should have been visible for miles.

The men were shapeless masses in the dark. I thought of trying to slip away into the trees, but Dougal, apparently divining my thought, grabbed my elbow and pulled me towards the ponies.

'Jamie, get yourself up,' he called. 'The lass will ride wi' you.' He squeezed my elbow. 'You can hold the reins, if Jamie canna manage one-handed, but do ye take care to keep close wi' the rest of us. Should ye try anythin' else, I shall cut your throat. D'ye understand me?'

I nodded, throat too dry to answer. His voice was not particularly threatening, but I believed every word. I was the less tempted to 'try anythin', in that I had no idea what to try. I didn't know where I was, who my companions were, why we were leaving with such urgency or where we were going, but I lacked any reasonable alternatives to going with them. I was worried about Frank, who must long since have started looking for me, but this didn't seem the time to mention him.

Dougal must have sensed my nod, for he let go of my arm and stooped suddenly beside me. I stood stupidly staring down at him until he hissed, 'Your foot, lass! Give me your foot! Your *left* foot,' he added disgustedly. I hastily took my misplaced right foot out of his hand and stepped up with my left. With a slight grunt, he boosted me into the saddle in front of Jamie, who gathered me in closely with his good arm.

In spite of the general awkwardness of my situation I was grateful for the young Scot's warmth. He smelt strongly of woodsmoke, blood and unwashed male, but the night chill bit through my thin dress and I was happy enough to lean back against him.

With no more than a faint chinking of bridles we moved off into the starlit night. There was no conversation among the men, only a general wary watchfulness. The ponies broke into a trot as soon as we reached the track, and I was jostled too uncomfortably to want to talk myself, even assuming that anyone was willing to listen.

My companion seemed to be having little trouble, in spite of being unable to use his right hand. I could feel his thighs behind mine, shifting and pressing occasionally to guide the pony. I clutched the edge of the short saddle in order to stay seated; I had been on horses before, but was by no means the horseman this Jamie was.

After a time we reached a cross track, where we stopped a moment while the bald man and the leader conferred in low tones. Jamie dropped the reins over the pony's neck and let it wander to the verge to crop grass, while he began twisting and turning behind me.

‘Careful!’ I said. ‘Don’t twist like that or your dressing will come off! What are you trying to do?’

‘Get my plaid loose to cover you,’ he replied. ‘You’re shivering. But I canna do it one-handed. Can ye reach the clasp of my brooch for me?’

With a good deal of tugging and awkward shifting we got the plaid loosened. With a surprisingly dexterous swirl he twirled the cloth out and let it settle, shawl-like, around his shoulders. He then put the ends over my shoulders and tucked them neatly under the saddle edge, so that we were both warmly wrapped.

‘There!’ he said. ‘We dinna want ye to freeze before we get there.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, grateful for the shelter. ‘But where are we going?’

I couldn’t see his face, behind and above me, but he paused a moment before answering.

At last he laughed shortly. ‘Tell ye the truth, lassie, I don’t know. Daresay we’ll both find out when we get there, eh?’

Something seemed faintly familiar about the section of countryside through which we were passing. Surely I knew that large rock formation ahead, the one shaped like a rooster’s tail?

‘Cocknammon Rock!’ I exclaimed.

‘Aye, reckon,’ said my escort, unexcited by this revelation.

‘Didn’t the English use it for ambushes?’ I asked, trying to remember the dreary details of local history Frank had spent hours regaling me with over the last week. ‘If there is an English patrol in the neighbourhood . . .’ I hesitated. If there was an English patrol in the neighbourhood, perhaps I was wrong to draw attention to it. And yet, in case of an ambush, I would be quite indistinguishable from my companion, shrouded as we were in one plaid. And I thought again of Captain Jonathan Randall, and shuddered involuntarily. Everything I had seen since I had stepped through the cleft stone pointed towards the completely irrational conclusion that the man I had met in the wood

was in fact Frank's six-times-great-grandfather. I fought stubbornly against this conclusion, but was unable to formulate another that met the facts.

I had at first imagined that I was merely dreaming more vividly than usual, but Randall's kiss, rudely familiar and immediately physical, had dispelled that impression. Neither did I imagine that I had dreamed being knocked on the head by Murtagh; the soreness on my scalp was being matched by a chafing of my inner thighs against the saddle, which seemed most undreamlike. And the blood; yes, I was familiar enough with blood to have dreamed of it before. But never had I dreamed the scent of blood; that warm, coppery tang that I could still smell on the man behind me.

'*Tck.*' He clucked to our mount and urged it up alongside the leader's, engaging the burly shadow in quiet Gaelic conversation. The ponies slowed to a walk.

At a signal from the leader, Jamie, Murtagh and the small bald man dropped back, while the others spurred up and galloped towards the rock, a quarter mile ahead to the right. A half moon had come up, and the light was bright enough to pick out the leaves of the bluebells growing on the trackside, but the shadows in the clefts of the rock could hide anything.

Just as the galloping shapes passed the rock, a flash of musket fire sparked from a hollow. There was a bloodcurdling shriek from directly behind me, and the pony leaped forward as though jabbed with a sharp stick. We were suddenly racing towards the rock across the heather, Murtagh and the other man alongside, hair-raising screams and bellows splitting the night air.

I hung on to the pommel for dear life. Suddenly reining up next to a large gorse bush, Jamie grabbed me round the waist and unceremoniously dumped me into it. The pony whirled sharply and sprinted off again, circling the rock to come along the south side. I could see the rider crouching low in the saddle as the pony vanished into the rock's shadow. When it emerged, still galloping, the saddle was empty.

The rock surfaces were cratered with shadow; I could

hear shouts and occasional musket shots, but couldn't tell if the movements I saw were those of men, or only the shades of the stunted trees that sprouted from cracks in the rock.

I extricated myself from the bush with some difficulty, picking bits of prickly gorse from my skirt and hair. I licked a scratch on my hand, wondering what on earth I was to do now. I could wait for the battle at the rock to be decided. If the Scots won, or at least survived, I supposed they would come back looking for me. If they did not, I could approach the English, who might well assume that if I were travelling with the Scots I was in league with them. In league to do what, I had no idea, but it was quite plain from the men's behaviour at the cottage that they were up to something which they expected the English strongly to disapprove of.

Perhaps it would be better to avoid both sides in this conflict. After all, now that I knew where I was, I stood some chance of getting back to a town or village that I knew, even if I had to walk all the way. I set off with decision towards the track, tripping over innumerable lumps of stone, the bastard offspring of Cocknammon Rock.

The moonlight made walking deceptive; though I could see every detail of the ground, I had no depth perception; flat plants and jagged stones looked the same height, causing me to lift my feet absurdly high over nonexistent obstacles and stub my toes on protruding rocks. I walked as fast as I could, listening for sounds of pursuit behind me.

The noises of battle had faded by the time I reached the track. I realized that I was too visible on the way itself, but I needed to follow it, if I were to find my way to a town. I had no sense of direction in the dark, and had never learned from Frank his trick of navigation by the stars. Thinking of Frank made me want to cry, so I tried to distract myself by trying to make sense of the day's events.

It seemed inconceivable, but all appearances pointed to my being in some place where the customs and politics of the mid-eighteenth century still held sway. I would have thought the whole thing a fancy-dress show of some type, had it not been for the injuries of the young man they called

Jamie. That wound had indeed been made by something very like a musket ball, judging from the evidence it left behind. The behaviour of the men in the cottage was not consistent with any sort of play-acting, either. They were serious men, and the dirks and swords were real.

Could it be some secluded enclave, perhaps, where the villagers re-enacted part of their history periodically? I had heard of such things in Germany, though never in Scotland. *You've never heard of the actors shooting each other with muskets, either, have you?* jeered the uncomfortably rational part of my mind.

I looked back at the rock to check my position, then ahead to the skyline, and my blood ran cold. There was nothing there but the feathered needles of pine trees, impenetrably black against the spread of stars. Where were the lights of Inverness? If that was Cocknammon Rock behind me, as I knew it was, then Inverness must be less than three miles to the southwest. At this distance I should be able to see the glow of the town against the sky. If it were there.

I shook myself irritably, hugging my elbows against the chill. Even admitting for a moment the completely implausible idea that I was in another time than my own, Inverness had stood in its present location for some six hundred years. It was there. But, apparently, it had no lights. Under the circumstances this strongly suggested that there were no electric lights to be had. Yet another piece of evidence, if I needed it. But evidence of what, exactly?

A shape stepped out of the dark so close in front of me that I nearly bumped into it. Stifling a scream I turned to run, but a large hand gripped my arm, preventing escape.

'Dinna worry, lass. 'Tis me.'

'That's what I was afraid of,' I said crossly, though in fact I was relieved that it was Jamie. I was not so afraid of him as of the other men, though he looked just as dangerous. Still, he was young, even younger than me, I judged. And it was difficult for me to be afraid of someone I had so recently treated as a patient.

'I hope you haven't been misusing that shoulder,' I said in

the rebuking voice of a hospital matron. If I could establish a sufficient tone of authority, perhaps I could persuade him into letting me go.

‘Yon wee stramash didna do it any good,’ he admitted, massaging the shoulder with his free hand.

Just then he moved into a patch of moonlight and I saw the huge spread of blood on his shirt front. Arterial bleeding, I thought at once; but then, why is he still standing?

‘You’re hurt!’ I exclaimed. ‘Have you broken open your shoulder wound, or is it fresh? Sit down and let me see!’ I pushed him towards a pile of boulders, rapidly reviewing procedures for emergency field treatment. No supplies to hand, save what I was wearing. I was reaching for the remains of my slip, intending to use it to stanch the flow, when he laughed.

‘Nay, pay it no mind, lass. This lot isna *my* blood. Not much of it, anyway,’ he added, plucking the soaked fabric gingerly away from his body.

I swallowed, feeling a bit queasy. ‘Oh,’ I said weakly.

‘Dougal and the others will be waiting by the track. Let’s go.’ He took me by the arm, less as a gallant gesture than a means of forcing me to accompany him. I decided to take a chance and dug in my heels.

‘No! I’m not going with you!’

He stopped, surprised at my resistance. ‘Yes, you are.’ He didn’t seem upset by my refusal; in fact, he seemed slightly amused that I had any objection to being kidnapped again.

‘And what if I won’t? Are you going to cut my throat?’ I demanded, forcing the issue. He considered the alternatives and answered calmly.

‘Why, no. You don’t look heavy. If ye won’t walk, I shall pick you up and sling ye over my shoulder. Do ye want me to do that?’ He took a step towards me, and I hastily retreated. I hadn’t the slightest doubt he would do it, injury or no.

‘No! You can’t do that; you’ll damage your shoulder again.’