

## Chapter 6

The curtains had been pulled back and radiant sunlight streamed through the window. Gilly feared opening her eyes: did her migraine skulk in the shadows or had it been routed? She screwed her eyes tight shut, gingerly opened one, then the other: no headache, no nausea, no bouncing lights. 'Thank . . . you . . . God!' She pulled back the bedcovers, swung a pair of shapely legs out of bed and waited for the dizziness to subside. Without warning, a wave of nausea snatched back her gratitude and Gilly groped for the bucket. She found instead a blue and white chamber pot. The door opened and she lifted her face out of the china vessel long enough to see a small, plump woman enter, carrying a pile of white fabric.

A bonnie smile lit up the wee woman's eyes. 'Good morning,' she said.

Gilly stared at the woman who looked like she'd just stepped off the page of a Georgette Heyer, Regency romance. 'Have you seen my bucket? This was all I could find.'

'I will empty that for you.'

'Don't worry, I'll do it later.' Fascinated, Gilly continued to stare, the woman wore a long, brown, empire-line dress covered by a pristine white apron. A chemisette of crisp, white organdie around her neck was tucked primly into the décolleté. A single grey curl broke free from a dainty lace cap.

'It will disappear soon enough.'

'What will?' asked Gilly.

'The sickness caused by the child you carry.' She removed, what looked like, a stale crust from her apron pocket and handed it to Gilly. 'This will help.'

'Is it that obvious?' Gilly took the bread out of politeness not hunger. 'Thank you.'

'My name is Aisling and I ken a lassie with child, when I see one. Ruairaidh instructed me to attend you.'

'I'm Gillyflower Smith, but I prefer Gilly. Pleased to meet you, Aisling.' Gilly stumbled as she stood to extend a hand, but her attempt at politeness was ignored. The room spun, her head seemed unable to accept it was still attached to her body. 'I need a shower. Do you know where my sons are?'

'A bath will be prepared for you.'

'Oh, thank you,' said Gilly, somewhat taken aback.

'Your sons are in the nursery.' Aisling scooped up the fabric and headed towards the door.

'I didn't know the village had one.' Gilly tugged at the sleeves of a garment which was far too small and chafed her underarms. 'Have my boxes arrived?' Keen to be reunited with her belongings, the bath would be a quick one.

'I will return when your bath is ready,' said Aisling.

Gilly had a lot to do, a mental list already assembled. Tonight her sons would sleep in their own beds. She'd already asked the builders to assemble them and weather permitting the bedding could be aired outside. It had been months since Gilly had slept in her own bed with her own duvet. She planned to unpack her maternity clothes and restyle those which were no longer fashionable. She would have no further need of the glamorous evening dresses and chic suits once worn to the Officer's Mess. Those garments would be packed away along with the memories they held. 'There's shampoo and conditioner in the bathroom.' Gilly called after Aisling.

In the adjacent room, a large metal bathtub sat in front of an open fire. Two large ewers of water and a pile of white fabric had been laid out on a nearby table. The only other piece of furniture in the room, a wooden chair. Gilly trailed her fingers in the bathwater and found the temperature perfect. The desire to step into the inviting water impossible to ignore. She struggled a little to shed the uncomfortable linen shift, then steadied herself against the chair-back and stepped into the bath. Gilly closed her eyes and tried to empty her mind. Her brain stubbornly refused to co-operate: paint colour, choice of floor covering and light fittings all jostled for position.

'May I wash your hair now?'

The quietly asked question made Gilly jump. 'That would be great, thank you. Too much head movement, I'll get dizzy and throw up again. It's very kind of you to help me out. How did you get water up here? Who was it asked you to help me?' Gilly knew she was running away at the mouth and in a desperate attempt to halt the verbal deluge she held her nose and slid slowly under the water.

'The water was carried upstairs,' said Aisling as Gilly resurfaced.

'That must've taken ages. I really appreciate it. Thank you.'

'Ruaraidh.'

'Sorry.' Gilly removed her fingers from her ears, only to be deafened again as a second jug of water cascaded over her head. 'What did you say?'

'Ruaraidh instructed me to attend you.' said Aisling. With her hair washed and rinsed Gilly relaxed back in the warm water, eyes closed. She wasn't afforded the luxury of lying there for long. Aisling wrapped a piece of white fabric around her hair and a larger piece was held up, indicating Gilly's pampering was at an end. Aisling offered her hand and steadied Gilly as she stepped out of the bathtub. 'Ruaraidh is an honourable man. He will need to know all the facts.' A dim memory stirred in Gilly's head. She'd heard the name before. Cal mentioned someone called Ruaraidh at Allen's funeral. One of his Papa said moments. Coincidence, she told herself.

'All what facts?' asked Gilly.

'Put this on.' Aisling handed Gilly a full sleeved, white shirt. Gilly inspected the frilled cuffs, surprised to discover they were stitched by hand. Aisling wound a matching cravat around Gilly's neck, tied it in a bow and folded down the shirt collar. She passed Gilly a belt crafted in soft, black leather. 'I'm sorry this is all I could find to fit you. The dresses are far too small.'

The comment stung, Gilly didn't appreciate being told she was too large for the garments on offer, even though pregnant. 'No undies, then?' she asked and winced as the sharp edge of grief nicked her heart. Allen always appreciated her tendency to avoid lingerie whenever possible. Soft linen felt sublime against her skin, she wrapped the belt around her waist, fastened it loosely, rested the buckle on her baby bump. 'Do I look alright?'

'I will inform Ruaraidh you are ready to meet him.' The woman appeared a little shocked and muttered something about bare legs as she headed towards the door.

Gilly sat on the edge of the bed thinking how nice it was for the locals to rally round. Maybe all this help was what Roddy meant when he mentioned spying villagers. She would phone him, ask where her van load of belongings had been stashed. Her life packed away in

boxes. She needed to find the list her mum had compiled, every box numbered and the contents detailed. Gilly would unpack the essentials, everything else could be left until the house renovations were finished.

Cal barrelled into the room. 'Mama,' he yelled and scrambled onto the bed, followed by his older brother and two small girls. 'You've been asleep for ages.'

Locals and removals forgotten, Gilly concentrated on the kids. They were everywhere, jumping on the bed, running around, all talking and laughing at once. Thor and Vali settled at her feet. If only, she pondered, her children were as well-behaved as the dogs. 'Quiet, guys. Who collected you from nursery?'

'No-one,' said Drew. 'We walked.'

'You're not old enough to go out in the street without a grown-up. You know that. Did the nursery teacher know you were going home by yourselves?' She should have been there for her sons, made arrangements for their care, guilt elbowed it's way in. 'Where were the builders and Roddy?'

'The nursery's upstairs,' said Drew.

'Don't tell lies Drew.'

'I'm not, Ma, honest. I'll show you. Drew grabbed his mother's hand and pulled her towards the door.

'Hold on a mo, Drew. What are you wearing?'

'Aisling called them skeleton suits.' Drew and Cal were dressed in double breasted, cream suits with frilly collars. High-waisted trousers buttoned onto the jackets and instead of a fly there was a flap which buttoned on either side. *Cal will never get all those buttons undone quickly enough to pee and he'll scream blue murder.* Gilly ran expert fingers over the fabric, it was silk. *What idiot dresses three and four-year-olds in silk.* The unusual outfits were completed by some sort of socks and slip-on shoes with an ankle strap. Footwear which wouldn't last a day, given the punishment her boys wreaked on much sturdier shoes. The girls wore long, red and white, floral print dresses. Sweet and very Laura Ashley, but totally impractical for playing outside or nursery.

'What are you wearing?' Gilly asked again.

'It was all they had,' said Drew.

'You better, Mama?' asked Cal.

'Yup, I feel great, all clean and everything.' The iron fist which clutched Gilly's heart relaxed its grip a little. 'Your clothes and toys must be here somewhere. Shall we go and find them? I need to find some jeans. Drew are the builders here? Has Roddy phoned?'

'No, Ma.' Drew headed for the door with Thor, Vali and the older of the two girls. Gilly recognised hero worship when she saw it and the little girl had it bad.

'Missed you.' Cal sat next to his mother. 'No Jack, no songs and got no pants on,' he declared.

'I'm better now, so we can sort stuff out, today. Let's sit on that chair and I'll give you a proper cuddle.' Cal clambered onto his mother's lap and snuggled in. Isla stood motionless, beside the chair, Gilly reached out and tentatively stroked her strawberry blonde hair. 'There's room on my lap if you'd like a cuddle, too.' The child's focus remained on the floor, but she climbed up and settled into Gilly's embrace.

'Sing.' Cal lifted his head and looked at his mother. 'The Mullie one.' After a couple of verses of *Mull of Kintyre* both children were asleep. Isla remained asleep when Gilly moved her to the bed, she wasn't so lucky with her son. 'Sing, Mama.'

'Only if you promise to go to sleep.'

'Promise.' Gilly sat on the side of the bed, stroked her son's cheek and began to sing her mother's favourite lullaby.

'Speed bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing

Onward, the sailors cry

Carry the lad, that's born to be king

Over the sea to Skye.'

Ruaraidh listened at the open door. He feared illness would snatch this woman away before he could introduce himself. Conversation was not the only thing he wished to share. She had awoken passion and a compelling need which shocked him, when he realised that his broken mind and body could feel something other than pain and anger. Clad in little more than a shirt, she was exquisite. Barelegged and barefoot, she possessed the longest legs he had ever encountered. Ruaraidh forced his eyes away and focused on the two children. Mesmerised, he watched as she stroked the cheek of each child in turn. She sang an unfamiliar song of Culloden and Charles Stuart.

One which sixty years ago would have sentenced her to transportation or even hanging. Captivated by the scene he imagined the woman was his wife, the children theirs.

Gilly finished the song and when certain the children slept, surrendered to emotion and allowed tears to fall. She swiped a lace shirt cuff across tear stained cheeks.

'Here, take this.' Leaning heavily on the doorframe stood Allen, in his hand a white, lace edged handkerchief.

Once again heartache caught her unawares, how she detested the random nature of grief. 'Allen, is that you?' As soon as the words were given life she felt ridiculous. It couldn't possibly be her husband. The longer Gilly stared, the more confused she became. The face was Allen's, but no flicker of recognition registered in his eyes. Same colour of hair, but much longer and tied back. Eyes although surrounded by dark circles and bloodshot were an identical shade of blue. The face thinner, gaunt and he needed a shave. Same height, less broad across the shoulders and chest. He wore loose fitting breeches, held up by a belt, black knee high boots and a shirt similar to the one she wore. To Gilly's expert eye, the fit of his clothes indicated weight loss.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I could ask you the same question. How long have you been standing there staring at me?'

'Who are you?' he repeated, annoyance coloured his words.

'Gillyflower Smith. Gilly to friends and family. Ma or Mama to my kids and I don't know you well enough to reveal what my husband calls me,' she said, unable to keep the mischief from her voice. Her words brought a slight furrow to his brow.

'Lachlann tells me you are English.' His educated voice carried the faintest trace of a Scots accent, the gentle rolling of the letter 'r' caused the hairs on Gilly's arm to rise followed by the inevitable goosebumps.

'Yes, I am.' She had lived amongst Scots for six years and never experienced any problems. 'I was born in London. My husband was also English. Served with a Scots regiment, Royal Ross-shire Highlanders. Our sons were born in Aberdeen.'

'My name is Ruaraidh, not Allen.'

'You bear an uncanny resemblance to my husband.' Gilly looked into his eyes and saw nothing, no emotion whatsoever. 'I apologise for my mistake. Do you live in the village?'

'No.'

'You live in the local area?' Gilly wanted to know everything about this man.

'This, I believe, belongs to you.' Ruairaidh handed Allen's mess jacket to Gilly. He fingered the soft wool fabric. Reluctant to relinquish the garment or admit it comforted him. 'The contents of the pocket are undamaged.'

Gilly pressed the jacket to her face, inhaled deeply. The scent of Aramis clung to the jacket, as if Allen had recently taken it off. From the inside breast pocket, she removed cherished keepsakes. 'Thank you.' she whispered.

'What are they?' he asked.

'The glengarry was part of Allen's uniform. The picture was taken on our honeymoon. The medal for Army service.' Gilly took a deep breath, a futile attempt to control her voice. 'The letter was, was the last one he wrote to me.'

'Where is he?'

Another deep breath, she tried desperately to control her breathing. 'He . . . was killed. A . . . car bomb in Northern Ireland.'

'Car bomb, what is that?'

'Everyone knows that. It's a car packed with explosives and detonated by remote control or a timer.' Gilly checked the children, she had no intention of her son hearing this conversation. 'It's a very effective way of causing death and destruction.'

'What is a car?'

'Oh, for Christ's sake. What cave have you been living in?' The last remnants of Gilly's patience slipped away. 'Someone used a car to blow my husband to pieces.' She pushed past Ruairaidh, ran down a flight of stairs, straight through an open door. Outside in the sunlight, she slid to her knees sobbing. Finally, she'd said the words. Could she now release everything locked inside, the sorrow, the anger?

Ruairaidh followed, hindered by agonising pain.

'Ma.' Drew ran to his mother and flung his arms around her neck. 'It's okay, Ma. We'll look after you.'

Thor and Vali licked Gilly's face until a smile softened her lips. She felt warmth from the sun and realised Roddy was right, she could cope. There was a new home to enjoy, her beautiful sons and she was pregnant with Allen's child. She stood and yanked down the short shirt. 'Wouldn't want to offend misery guts, now, would we,' she muttered and brushed dirt from her knees. 'C'mon Drew, let's get your

brother and find some proper clothes.' Gilly took Drew by the hand and turned towards the house. Where she expected black storm doors, there were now white topped by a huge fanlight window. Granite remained, but there were no longer two storeys with bay windows but four storeys with Georgian style sash windows towered above them. On either side of this vast building was a two-storey wing. They were hemmed in on three sides by walls and windows. The only open side of the courtyard contained a low wall topped with iron railings and large double gates. This wasn't her new home. Gilly looked at Ruaraidh. 'Where are we?'

Before he had the opportunity to reply, a small blond whirlwind appeared from nowhere. Cal hurled himself at Ruaraidh, pummelled a large expanse of thigh with small fists. 'Stop it. Stop it. You made Mama cry.' Cal's onslaught stopped abruptly, he moved to Gilly's side and took her hand. He glared at his adversary, opened his mouth again and swore crudely at Ruaraidh. Gilly looked at her son with barely suppressed humour, astonished that his command of invective was so extensive.

Don't swear, darling. People will think you're an army brat,' she spoke gently, with no real criticism in her words as she fought to keep a straight face. She saw how fierce Cal's anger burned, how powerful his instinct to protect and she refused to trivialise such passion. Gilly recognised his growing strength of character, traits inherited from his father.

'Right guys, let's get our stuff and we'll go home.'

'We are home, Mama.' Cal smiled up at his mother. 'Papa said, we live here now.'