

Excited children's voices echoed around the bustling courtyard. The early morning drizzle did nothing to dampen the spirits of those leaving for Edinburgh. Lachlann's sons were used to travelling, but Ruairaidh's daughters had never left Dalnabreck. The prospect of journeying by boat and carriage sparked their imagination and both girls had spoken of nothing else for days. Three days earlier, all the baggage had been loaded on board a boat and taken to Glenfinnan, from where it had been loaded onto two hired wagons, which immediately left for Edinburgh.

Today, the carriage would need to make two trips to the jetty where two boats waited. Lachlann, Ruairaidh, two horses and four noisy children left first. Followed by Aisling, James, Annie and Cook, with two more horses. Neither Aisling or Cook were happy sharing their boat with horses but eventually stopped moaning, allowing the boat's captain to get under way.

Waiting at Glenfinnan was the coach hired for the journey. The men would ride on horseback, with the women and children travelling in the coach. Each day, both Lachlann and Ruairaidh allowed their eldest child to ride with them part of the way. The journey was far less challenging than Ruairaidh anticipated. The children made no fuss and the women travelling in the coach managed them easily. Two days before they were due in Edinburgh, Ruairaidh decided to ride on ahead, explaining to Lachlann that should his reconciliation with Gilly not have the desired outcome, he would prefer this to be a private affair.

Taking advantage of a clear night and a full moon, the sun had not yet risen when Ruairaidh reined in his horse outside the townhouse on George Street. He hadn't stayed in Edinburgh since the last time his father, desperate for a male grandchild, insisted he come home on leave and meet up with Eilidh. The couple spent three days in Edinburgh, barely speaking, and for three nights he did what was expected, and, unbeknown to him, a son was conceived. He was thankful when his ordeal ended and he was able to return to the army. Edinburgh held no pleasant memories and Ruairaidh remained apprehensive, not anticipating a warm welcome from Gilly.

Unable to gain access to his own house and feeling slightly ridiculous, Ruairaidh finally managed to rouse Will after hammering on the door for long enough to waken half the street, only to be told Gilly was still asleep. Refusing Will's offer of food and drink, he headed upstairs, not to the bedroom he'd been told Gilly was occupying, but to the nursery, as he could hear one of the twins crying. Settling Breagha had taken just a few minutes, as she recognised her uncle, responding to his voice. He may not appreciate the advantages of Bo'et, but he realised Allen was teaching his children well.

Raising his hand to knock, Ruairaidh changed his mind and opened the door. Gilly slept naked, her arms wrapped around a pillow. The breath caught in his throat, it was the exact same way she curled into his back when they shared a bed. Deeply shocked to witness her departure from Dalnabreck, he now recognised her gentle nature held not only a love of combat, but a stubborn streak to match his own and he had no idea whether or not there could be a resolution to their differences. He could only try.

The room was not as he remembered, it had been redecorated but remained a distinctly masculine room—his room. Green and cream wallpaper, with wood panelling beneath painted in a slightly darker shade of green. New cream, jacquard drapes on the four-poster, matched those at the window. The room was beautifully furnished, something he had never noticed before. The furniture remained the same: two exquisitely crafted chests of drawers and bedside tables in a walnut veneer—all of which looked freshly polished. On the far wall was a washstand and he smiled when he saw the nightstand had been removed. Eilidh had not shared this room with him. He had been required to seek out his first wife, creep into her room like a thief in the night, perform an act which neither one enjoyed, and leave, returning to a cold bed. He very much doubted it would be like that with Gilly, should he ever be permitted the opportunity to find out.

His wife stretched out, diagonally, across a bed, more than long enough to accommodate her six foot frame. Bedding was partially strewn on the floor and he picked it up, feeling its softness and thinking it perfectly suited to a Countess, then replaced it gently over the sleeping figure. Her clothes were folded and placed on the table. He sat on the edge of the bed, but found it impossible to wait for her to wake. He took her hand and kissed it gently. Her long, elegant fingers curled into a fist.

‘If your bastard brother-in-law told you where to look, you can fuck right off,’ she said.

Ruairaidh knew this was not an auspicious start. ‘Lachlann told me . . .’ His words interrupted.

‘Can an irregular marriage be annulled, dissolved, or whatever?’ she asked. ‘Non-consummation is grounds for annulment where I come from. Can you excuse me, I have to get up and see to the twins.’ She had no intention of making this reconciliation easy for him, but Ruairaidh remained seated on the bed. ‘Did you hear what I said? I no longer wish to be married to you. I need to get out of this bed and see if Archie and Breagha are alright.’

‘I want to kiss you, but we are not always afforded that which we desire,’ said Ruairaidh, ignoring her cutting remarks concerning their marriage.

‘Too right. Sometimes we get more than we bargained for,’ Gilly barked back.

