

Chapter One

“I will not go!” Annie stood with her back to the door, her hand behind her grasping the iron latch. “I will stay here with Alistair.”

“Annie, dear, don’t be foolish. He’s a boy and hasn’t proved himself yet.” Christie’s words were soft and avoided the real issue.

“He’s a bastard and the son of a witch woman.” Big John’s words cut to the heart of the disagreement.

Annie’s eyes filled with tears. “That’s hardly his fault.”

“Aye, the one to blame is his mother. It’s a shame she didn’t have the foresight to prevent him.”

“Poppa! How can you say such a thing? Alistair is ...”

“Alistair is a useless dreamer, and I’ll not have a daughter of mine chasing after the likes of that. You’ll do as I say and come with us in the morning.” Big John pushed his daughter aside and stomped out into the night.

The tears that Annie had been hanging onto came then, and she hurried to the relative privacy of her curtained bed. She stuffed the corner of her pillow into her mouth to muffle the sound of the sobs she could no longer control.

Alistair is not a bastard. If he is, it’s not his fault. Poppa had no right to say that. Her thoughts were jerky and barely coherent. I don’t want to go to the Colonies without Alistair. The tears flowed hard again and she was overheated and flushed with the weeping of them.

Presently Christie came to her daughter. The bed creaked as she lowered her sturdy body onto the edge of it. She put her arm around Annie’s waist and turned her onto her side.

“Hush, now, Annie. You’ll be making yourself sick with tears.”

“How can he say such things, Momma?” sobbed Annie. “Alistair is a good boy and will be a good man someday. I love him and I don’t want to leave him. If I go to with you, I’ll never see him again.”

Christie brushed the wild, dark hair out of her daughter’s face with work-roughened hands. “The truth is, Annie, Alistair is just a boy yet. He’s in no position to take on a wife. For once a wife comes, the bairns are not far behind. And what would you do? You’re no more than a bairn yourself.”

Annie rolled onto her back. “I’m eighteen, Momma. You had me when you were only seventeen.”

Christie sighed. “And it wasn’t easy. Your father was already established in this farm, but it still wasn’t easy. You were only two when they turned all the land to sheep and things have been tight and getting tighter ever since.”

Annie sniffed and rubbed at her eyes, then rummaged in the pocket of her apron for her handkerchief.

“You’re Big John’s only girl and he’s that proud of you. Don’t break his heart.” The straw tick rustled as Christie rose from the edge of the bed. “Get up, now, and finish packing your cobhàn.”

Annie did as she was told. Retrieving her belongings from shelves, she packed them into the small chest that was hers. A frown creased her forehead and the tears she had shed earlier seemed to have hardened into a mask on her creamy cheeks. Occasionally she sniffed and blew her nose. Presently she finished packing and stood her cobhàn beside the door.

“I’m going to bed, Momma.” She bent to kiss her mother’s cheek, a thing she hadn’t done since she was twelve.

“Goodnight, then, dearie. Sleep well.” Christie caught Annie’s hand as she turned to go. “You do see the right of this, don’t you?”

Annie nodded briefly and turned away. “Goodnight, Momma.” She retreated behind the curtain and prepared herself for bed. She lay for a long time watching the shadows cast by her mother’s candle on the other side of the curtain. In a while her father returned.

“I see her cobhàn is packed. Were you able to talk sense into her?” He closed the door behind himself. The iron latch dropped into place with a small clank.

Christie looked up from the chest she was packing. “I think so. For the moment at least.”

Big John dragged his chair closer to the fire and pulled off his boots. “She has no business to be running after the likes of Alistair. The next thing she’ll be in the family way and no husband to speak of.”

“Och, John, how can you say such a thing about your own daughter? She has always been a good girl.” Christie rolled a winter vest and tucked it into an empty corner of the cobhàn.

John pulled out his pipe and leaned to reach the last bit of tobacco in his left pocket. It had been a present from his brother in America and the only tobacco he had used in several years. Such was the economy of the Hebrides that no one had the money to spare on the small pleasures of life.

“There’s nothing good about running after the son of a witch woman.” He filled his pipe and sucked on it twice to test the draw then struck a match. “And a bastard at that. There would be no good come of it. There’s been no good come of it so far.” He arranged his pipe between his teeth and applied the match. It flared briefly, then was drawn into the bowl of the pipe. “It’s bad enough that Annie has the eyes of a witch herself without encouraging her to associate with one.”

Christie’s hands ceased their work and she stared at her husband in the glow from the hearth. “John! Belle is a healer. She’s not a witch. You went to her yourself when you had the boil that wouldn’t heal and she cured you.”

“I was down to my last resources,” replied John. “If the doctor had been any good I needn’t have gone to her at all.”

“Well, the doctor wasn’t any good, for all his salves and soaks. Belle healed you in five days, too. And there’s not a mark on you where it was, either.” Christie’s hands resumed their folding.

“That’s true, but was there witchcraft involved? Duncan said he saw her that night standing in the moonlight on top of Jock’s hill worshipping the moon.”

“Och, Duncan’s not wise himself. Belle always liked to walk out late at night. She said it was the only time she could enjoy the peace of God and nature.” Christie folded the last of the woollen shirts and packed it around the only china piece she owned. A serving plate with pink roses, it had been given to her by her mother when she had married John MacPhail.

Momma saved it from her own wedding, thought Christie. It always leaned against the wall on the mantle shelf and no one was allowed to touch it but herself. Christie’s attention was drawn back to what Big John was saying.

“There, you see, by her own admission she worships nature. That’s just what Duncan said she was doing, standing there in the moonlight with her arms raised high to heaven.”

“Well, she did heal you.” Christie pulled the cobhàn lid closed, then sat on the top to fasten it. “There, I’m finished, and glad of it. I’m going to bed.”

Annie listened to the soft rustling of her mother as she prepared for bed. Presently she heard a thump as Christie got to her knees, then the murmur of her voice as she recited her bedtime prayers. Soon her father joined her mother and the rustling ceased.

Annie waited in the dark for what seemed an hour. At last her father’s hearty snore and the gentle breathing of her mother signalled that they were both asleep. Annie slipped out of bed in the darkness. With only the moon’s white light to see by, she pulled off her nightgown which concealed her day clothes and rolled it into a bundle. She tucked it under her arm and picked up her shoes.

Poppa made these for me, she thought. The thought was almost her undoing. She pushed out of her mind the image of her father at work by the light of the candle last winter fashioning these very shoes.

I cannot turn back. The thought was so firm in her mind that it seemed as if she had said it aloud. Her father snorted and turned over in his sleep, and her mother stirred. Annie crept silently across the kitchen past the bed where her younger brothers slept. Their bed curtain had already been packed and the moonlight illuminated their faces. It softened somewhat the dark shadows beneath their eyes and threw their high, broad cheek bones into silhouette.

“Goodbye, Jamie and Sandy,” she whispered. “I pray to God I see you again in this life.” She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat, then turned and raised the door latch without a sound and slipped out into the moonlight.

Her steps took her high up on the moor. She climbed until she reached a granite outcropping to shelter beside. A breeze blew from the Irish Sea, keeping the night cool and penetrating the warmth of her grey drugget dress. Overhead, the northern stars sparkled cold and bright against the dark blue of the summer night sky. The gold of sunset on the western horizon faded as the emerald green of dawn grew to the east. The moon sat low on the horizon for a time then disappeared past the curve of the earth.

I wish I had brought my shawl, she thought, but it's too late now. I cannot go back. She unrolled her nightdress from under her arm and wrapped it around herself. It's better than nothing. It's all I've got. She broke off some branches of heather and stacked them next to the rock to make a resting place, then sat down on it, the sweet dusty smell of heather rising to her nostrils. She pulled her feet under her skirt to keep them warm while she waited for morning.

The sun rose at three o'clock, for it was high summer. Slowly the shepherds' clouds turned from the pale pink of first light to the snowy white of a sunny day. Annie sat huddled and shivering against the rock. At least it's not raining or foggy for a change, she thought, as she watched the night mists in the glen dissolve in the warmth of the rising sun.

Overhead a hawk wheeled and soared in the clear air watching for the scurry of breakfast in the heather below. Presently he dived. There was a sharp squeak and the hawk rose again with a small furry body hanging limp in his claws. Below her, Annie watched the first stirrings of her own household. Her mother came to the door and gazed out across the moor, then up to where Annie sat. Annie shrank back against the rock and sat very still. Presently her father joined her mother on the threshold. He, too, scanned the horizon.

"Annie! Annie!" he shouted. The sound but not the words carried on the breeze from the sea.

Annie clamped her lips shut to prevent her answer escaping. I've never not answered him before, she thought. It's rude and wrong of me to behave this way, but, oh, I cannot leave Alistair, even for love of you, Poppa. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed quietly into the dawn coldness of them. Presently she looked up to see her father striding away towards Belle's and Alistair's cottage. In a minute he was past the kirk and out of sight. Below her, her mother sent the boys off in different directions.

Annie watched as the boys climbed the moor. Sandy passed close by. Annie reached out a hand then withdrew it, and clamped her lips firmly shut over the cry that had almost escaped her. It's fortunate he's too little to know about this place yet, she thought. She turned to watch him go. Soon her father returned. Annie watched as he talked to her mother in the dooryard. Her mother's shoulders sagged a little and she leaned on Big John for just a moment. Then she squared her shoulders and went into the house.

That's Momma, thought Annie and swallowed hard against hot tears. How can I do this to them? She rose to her feet, then sat down again. How can they do this to me? They know I love Alistair, and I told them I wouldn't leave. She held that thought in her mind all morning as she watched the cart come for their belongings.

Soon everything was loaded. Big John hoisted Sandy on top of the load. Christie closed the door of the cottage. She stood looking around herself for a few moments as if to memorize the dooryard and the rising moor outside the gate. Her eyes searched once more, as if by staring hard Annie would magically appear. The cart pulled away from the gate and Christie turned and followed Big John down the road.

Annie watched all morning. Finally, at the top of the tide, Polly, one ship of the Earl of Selkirk's three, came into view at the harbour mouth. In the throng that crowded the ship's rails Annie could not

discern her parents. She stood on the rocky outcropping and watched until they were no more than a dot on the horizon. “Well, they’re gone, and I’m still here. I hope Alistair is glad.”