

A man with short brown hair is shown from the chest up, in profile, looking towards the right. He is wearing a red and black plaid shawl draped over his left shoulder. The background is a scenic view of a Scottish landscape with green hills, a waterfall, and mountains in the distance under a cloudy sky.

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A
SCANDALOUS
LIAISON
on Skye

MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

Isle of Skye, June 1746

The faint sound of the village church bells pealing, carried on the gentle summer breeze, caused Rory MacDonald to bow his head. Not in silent prayer but in utter dejection. Sorchu was married. He should have done as she'd bid him last night, and sailed from Skye at first light, quit the island of his birth forever, avoiding the risk of capture by Cumberland's men, but leaving his heart behind.

There was no hope left for he and Sorchu. There never had been. But he could not resist one last visit to the Fairy Pools, the secret trysting place where their love had bloomed amid the magical combination of rocks, tumbling water and heather. An elemental place, befitting the visceral nature of their passion.

Rory gazed at their favourite pool, with its natural stone arch under which they swam, exhilarating in the sensation of the cold water on their skin. The pool was sea-green today, crystal clear as ever, the boulders beneath polished by the pounding of the falls. The sound was magnified by the natural amphitheatre formed by the majestic Black Cuillin rising steep and jagged in the distance, though the mountains, kissed by the summer sun, were not black at all today but subtle shades of ochre and grey, the scree glittering like silver dust.

He'd been helping her father with the harvest the day they met, one of several of his clan sent across to MacLeod lands each year in payment for some long forgotten favour. Sorchu brought them food in the fields. He couldn't recollect what it was they'd talked of, but he could still remember her smile, the spark between them, the certainty, from the moment their eyes first met, that they were meant for each other. But theirs was a forbidden love even before the Young Pretender's arrival made the MacDonalds and the MacLeods sworn enemies, for Sorchu had been betrothed at birth to another.

For three years now they'd been secretly meeting at this remote spot. When he left to

follow the Prince, the mountain tops had still carried a dusting of snow, the Fairy Pools, fed by snowmelt coursing down the glen, were icy blue. The seasons made scant difference to the temperature of the water. It took your breath away when you plunged in. You'd think it would cool your ardour, water like that. How many times had they tested that theory, jumping from the rock ledge together when their kisses progressed from longing, to desire, to passion? Too many to count, and yet he wished he had, for it would be a tangible measure of their love for him to cling on to. And of his honour too, for despite the passion which at times threatened to consume them, he had not taken what had been promised to another man. Not even last night, when Sorcha had all but begged him to, though he had been sore tempted.

But once would serve only to torment him forever, knowing what he had lost. He wanted to be her last love, not just her first, he'd told her, holding her achingly close, his chin resting on the silken mass of her hair, her face pressed against his chest. He would forever be her only love, she had sobbed.

Time was becoming pressing, if he was to make good his escape. Rory folded his plaid over his shoulder in preparation for leaving. A long strand of her hair, the colour of autumn leaves, had caught in the wool. He plucked it, watching it flutter its way down into the rippling waters of the Fairy Pools.

Would it have been better if he'd not returned from the uprising? A lifetime ago, it seemed now, the day he'd left Skye with his kin, headed for Glenfinnan, where they'd watched the Prince raise the standard. Her brothers had aligned with their kin to the other side. Now Charles Edward Stuart had fled, helped on his way by one of Rory's own, and he must follow too, if he valued his life. Grimly, Rory turned away from the pools and headed for the narrow track which followed the River Brittle as it meandered down the glen.

Sorcha's wedding gown was silver and blue, the colours of constancy. Her mother had

placed a silver coin in her left shoe for luck. Her mother, she thought as she hurried along the path, had sensed that her marriage would need all the luck it was possible to garner, if it were to succeed.

She had braced herself to go through with it. She'd never once considered the possibility that she could not. Not even last night, when her tears mingled with their kisses by the Fairy Pools, and she'd bid Rory goodbye for the last time. He was her one true love. But not even then had she not dared to defy her family, for her ingrained sense of duty had its roots in a tradition far older than her love for Rory. Besides, her bridegroom was a kind and honourable man. An ideal choice, save that he was not Rory.

When her mother left her briefly alone in her room to compose herself for the coming ceremony rebellious thoughts stirred, and Sorcha asked herself for the first time, why? Why must she do as they bid her? Why must her heart's desire be denied? Why must she sacrifice her love for her family?

It was like a huge wave crashing over her. Her senses reeling, of their own accord, her feet took her down the back stairs and out of the house. He had promised to leave at first light, but still she flew, picking up the skirts of the wedding dress which would never see the inside of the church, running full tilt towards their trysting place. Later, she would perforce return, shamed but unrepentant. She would be exiled. But she would not, could not, belong to another.

He would be long gone, she told herself, but there was a part of her that clung to faint hope, and that part of her was rewarded. For as the succession of pools and falls came into view, there he was, standing stock still, gazing at her as if she was a spectre. Heart thudding, she slowed to a trembling walk.

Rory. Still defiantly wearing his battle plaid, his dark, untamed hair fluttering around his face. That beloved, handsome face. She could find him in the dark, she knew him so well.

He did not move until she stood next to him, smiling up at him. ‘Sorcha,’ he said, with such an ache in his voice.

‘I couldn’t go through with it,’ she said, taking his hand. ‘I want to be both your first and your last.’

‘But the church bells? I thought....’

‘My disappearance will have been quickly discovered. They ring to raise the alarm.’

Rory pulled her into his arms. ‘*Mo ghràdh, mo chridhe*, then we must flee.’ He kissed her, deeply, swiftly, tenderly. His fingers tightened around hers. ‘You know this means that we can never return to our homeland?’

‘We have each other,’ Sorcha said, casting a last look at the Fairy Pools. ‘And anyway, I believe the spirit of our love will live on here, long after we’re gone. Do you think others who stand on this spot in the future will sense it?’

‘I would dearly like to think so. Come, our own future beckons.’

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