

BEGINS TODAY Our Sparkling Story Written Exclusively for My Weekly by Best-selling Author

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* Storms Over Lochalan *

Part One: The sleepy Highland village of Lochalan is seen very differently by two of its residents – but who will be leaving?

The morning sun shone brightly on the village of Lochalan, on the glittering water before it, the mountains behind and the girl with the long red hair mooching along the street behind the shorefront.

An old couple looked askance at her as she clomped past in her wedge heels and mini-skirt.

Moira tossed her long red hair in defiance. So what if she was forced to live in the furthest-flung part of the northern hemisphere? She could still make her own clothes, adapting what she saw in Vogue and on the internet.

Even if, for the moment, her plans to train for a career in fashion had been derailed. Her A level results, just achieved, had been easily good enough to

Her dad was vehemently against her going to live in London

get her into her favoured fashion college. But then her father had put his foot down.

Dad was vehemently against her going to London. He regarded it as a den of iniquity; his daughter, his only child, would go there only over his dead body.

It was, Moira knew, no use turning to her timid mother for help. She took the line of least resistance with Dad and it was as much as she could cope with to run the dairy shop selling homemade cheese from the farm.

Her father's plans to get his daughter to run the shop instead would, Moira was

determined, be resisted all the way. There was more to life than shopkeeping, unless the shop was her own couture boutique in Knightsbridge.

She tossed her hair again as she walked. To her right, above the slate roofs, mast tops poked up from the harbour beyond. Out of a half-open window drifted the sound of someone putting their fiddle through its paces.

Along she went, past the Fisherman pub with its thick white walls and tiny windows, and along the row of white-painted cottages.

The old people still lived in some of them but an increasing number were holiday lets. All summer – or what passed for summer up here in the far North West Highlands – visitors' wetsuits and towels were draped outside along the railings to

dry. The wetsuits would be gone after a week, a fortnight at the most. People were constantly leaving Lochalan. If only she could go too.

On her left now was the low white-painted front of the Giant Angus MacBoggle museum. Nowhere in the whole of Lochalan, Moira felt, was there an institution that more summed up the village's catatonic dullness.

A century or so before, the museum had been the home of the tallest man in the North West Highlands (the eponymous Angus) and now contained

artefacts such as his chair and cooking pots. The holidaying teenage children she saw shambling into it after their parents on wet days looked suicidal.

Helloo there, Moira!" a voice boomed into her thoughts.

It was Cameron. Moira forced a smile. Cameron's boat, Glasgow Kiss, was one of Lochalan's big draws. Under the slogan "If You Want To See A Flipper be A Seal Trip Tripper", it ran three hour-long voyages a day in season out to the seal islands in the middle of the loch.

Cameron had a great line in amusing patter for the tourists.

"See that seal there?" he would ask. "It's called Ron." The tourists would nod earnestly and then start to grin as they worked out the joke. Ronseal.

But Moira thought the real joke was seeing him pretend to remember the names of all the posh children whose parents returned every year.

"And, don't remind me, this is..." he would hazard, as yet another infant in mini-me Hunter wellies and a floral Boden gilet climbed aboard.

"Maisie," the strident London mother would supply. "And you remember Cassian, of course?"

This was the cue for a side-parted boy frowning into a Nintendo to be pushed into view.

"Helloo Maisie, helloo Cassian," Cameron would boom good-naturedly, making the parents' day and ensuring their custom for another few years.

Moira could never understand why it was so important for these obviously successful people from the big city to have Cameron acknowledge them.

"Want to come out with me today?" Cameron offered now. "Kenny's off sick again, I could do with the help."

Kenny was Cameron's assistant. He was also a regular at the Fisherman and the two loyalties occasionally conflicted.

Cameron stared appreciatively at Moira's legs as she climbed in. "How's the love life?" he grinned.



Even Cameron's banter failed to raise Moira's spirits

"What do you think?" Moira shot back.

She had only scorn for the local lumps she had been at school with, boys who wanted to be fishermen or farmers like their fathers. The only exceptions were at Lochalan Castle, the local big house which had, a few years ago, been bought and refurbished by some rich City types.

The couple, The Gordons, had two sons but they were away at boarding school a lot of the time and lived in London for much of the rest, or so Moira had gathered from Mrs Muir in the post office.

Mrs Muir had told her, last time she had been in, that the Gordons were selling up. "They've got bored of the place, I hear," she said, popping in a toffee with a disapproving scrunch of her lips.

Cameron cast off and started to pilot towards Lochalan's stone pier, the boarding point for the seal trips. A number of Boden families were already gathered, nudging each other as the boat neared.

"Och, well," Cameron shouted to Moira above the roar of the engine. "There's the Big Ships coming. They'll be up here tomorrow, so I've heard. You

"Might be your lucky night, Moira," Cameron said with a wink

might meet yourself someone nice."

"Not bloody likely," said Moira.

Although it got much of the village in a frenzy of excitement, this annual Tall Ships' race left her cold. So what if it was tradition for them to come in from the sea, up the loch and spend the night in Lochalan harbour?

People like her schoolfriend Katie, who now worked in Lochalan's Spar, got in a frenzy. To Moira's disgust, Katie practically swooned at the sailors who stalked up and down Fore Street as if they owned the place, then weighed anchor next morning and were off in a blast of expensive aftershave.

"The Tall Ships probably won't come anyway," she observed now to Cameron, knowing as she did the treacherous propensity of the local weather to slip stealthily down the hills in the night and smother the town in fog.

Cameron squinted up at the cloudless blue sky. "Looks fine to me. Might be your lucky night, eh?" he winked as Glasgow Kiss came up alongside the pier.

"Now," he said, turning his attention to his customers. "That isn't little Maisie I see there, is it? How she's grown! And is that Cassian?"

Up at Lochalan Castle, Sasha Gordon laid down her brush and sighed. Catching the exact way the light bounced off the surface of Loch Alan seemed to be beyond her this morning. But she would persevere. Like Monet and the cathedral at Rouen, she had imagined she had captured the water view from her garden in all its guises, over all the seasons, but was always discovering new ones.

Sasha picked up her brush again. She couldn't waste time. There would be **Continued overleaf...**

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fewer and fewer chances now, now Alex had decided to sell the Castle. She worked away, looking down at her canvas, then across at the water which seemed to have been polished, but not in the way the London cleaner did it. Only Edie, the Highlands' housekeeper, could make anything shine like that.

She would miss Edie, Sasha thought sadly. Their daily partings were becoming increasingly mournful.

Edie had gone ten minutes ago, only slightly cheered by the prospect of bottling the jam made from strawberries in the castle garden. The castle traditionally supplied a stall of preserves to be sold for the local lifeboat charity at the tiny street market laid on for the Tall Ships' race.

Lochalan was, and always had been, the most wonderful place

Sasha always enjoyed her stint behind the stall. People turned out, walked around, there was a festival mood. Locals sold fudge, soap, knitting and preserves, Edie's and the Castle's always the best of the latter.

Sasha didn't even want to think that it was her last market. Or Edie's last jam. If only there was a way round the sale. But Alex was right. The place was a white-painted elephant.

The boys never came now, and it had been half with them in mind, with ideas about sailing, stalking and just being outside in fresh air, that they had bought the Castle in the first place.

But clever, quick-witted Felix had chosen not to come this summer, citing a work placement on a glossy magazine.

For Milo, his younger brother, a friend's villa on Capri had proved rather more of a draw than Lochalan.

"Sorry, Ma," he had said, with the

lop-sided grin that always melted her heart. "But you understand, don't you?"

Sasha had nodded, but she didn't really. For her, Lochalan was, and always had been, the most wonderful place in the world.

She hated to criticise her sons, even in the silent privacy of her mind, but she thought nonetheless that at their age she would have been thrilled to have a whole castle to live in during the holidays.

Lochalan was so romantic, with its turrets, its flying flags, its slim-as-a-pencil towers topped with tiled witches' hats, its fairytale carved fireplaces, its great, graceful stone staircase rising to a vaulted upper landing. Even its wooden loo seats and polished copper piping were redolent of a more gracious way of living.



Never had she been more thrilled since the day, five years ago, when Alex her husband had seen "The Ancient Seat Of The Gordons" for sale in *Country Life*. He had gone all misty-eyed over his Celtic bloodline. A

large banker's bonus and an excess of sentiment were all that was required to snap it up on the spot.

But then, increasingly, Alex hardly ever came to Scotland either. His summers were spent in the office or at conferences in Frankfurt.

It had been left to her, without a drop of Scottish blood, to make the long journey north to air the place, check it for leaks, sort out the garden.

But it had never been a chore. Rather, the opposite. If Sasha could have lived there full time, she would have.

Scotland was so liberating. The air was clean, the skies were wide and, so far from London, she could feel like a different person altogether, free of her burdens as mother, banker's wife, director of household staff. She could paint, too, which she never could in the city.

"But aren't you lonely?" Alex would ask her when he called. "What do you do?" "Oh," Sasha would say vaguely. "There are people around."

There weren't though, not really. From time to time people bought the Victorian hunting lodge at Drum, on the other side of the loch. They tended to be bankers

too, and for a year or two there would be desultory exchange visits – chilly house parties with a bit of Scottish dancing. Then, like Alex, the bankers would get bored – too far, nothing to do – and Drum would be sold again. It was, Sasha knew, for sale at the moment. Or had been.

"And I do my painting," she would add to Alex, and he would reply, slightly mockingly, "Oh yes. Of course."

Her painting was just a hobby to Alex – a slightly silly one too. It was all effort, no money. His job, or so he led everyone to believe, was the opposite.

The fact that she made nothing at all of her own, was entirely dependent on her husband, had seemed less of an issue in the past when she had the boys to look after. That was work, was it not?

But of late, since they had started their own lives, it had crossed Sasha's mind more than once that an income of her own would be useful. Alex would, at least, then be obliged to take her views into consideration, rather than assume he owned them as he did everything else.

She loved him of course. But he was very much the fountain from which everything flowed and had a tendency, at times, to be rather high-handed.

Before Sasha even knew it, it was late afternoon and the light was becoming richer and thicker.

She had completed one canvas and was now well advanced with another, recording the sticky golden glow of the coming evening. Light clung to the outlines of the flowers and stippled the granite surface of the castle. Every crag on the mountainside looked as if King Midas had visited and the loch was turning from silver into liquid gold. It was beautiful, Sasha thought, surrendering entirely to the moment.

"Mrs Gordon!" The voice broke in on her reverie. It was Edie's. "Oh, Mrs Gordon!"

Sasha sat up, blinking. "What is it, Edie?" The housekeeper's face was wrinkled with distress.

"The jam won't set!" Edie wailed. "I knew I'd left it too late! I did it in a hurry, and it's all gone wrong!"

Sasha sensed immediately the seriousness of the situation. Edie's jams were her pride and joy. They were always perfect, never went wrong. It was nothing less than a catastrophe.

"Oh, Edie!"

All Edie's Caledonian self-will now deserted her. "It's because of all the changes in the castle, Mrs Gordon," she



Edie had come up with a wonderful idea

keened, sending a little wave of guilt through Sasha. "I just wasn't concentrating. I must have put too much of something in, too little of something else..." She clapped a worn hand to her mouth and stared hard out to the loch. "The stall!" she exclaimed, in a high, tragic yelp.

Sasha stood up. "Well, can't we sell them as jelly?" she suggested practically. "Oh, no, of course not," she muttered as Edie turned anguished eyes on her.

"You don't understand, Mrs Gordon. I can't be seen selling runny jam in Lochalan. People will never forget. I won't be able to hold my head up ever again."

Sasha suppressed a sigh. It was tempting to laugh but that would be unforgivable. The woman had gone to pieces. It was up to her to save the day – but how?

"Well, we're going to have to put something on the stall, Edie," she said gently. "It's for charity..." she added but didn't finish the sentence as, with a gulping noise, Edie was walking swiftly

"It's a shame – all that talent and nobody sees your work"

away like some stricken heroine in a novel.

Really, Sasha thought, she had no idea Edie had such a talent for histrionics. The views weren't the only new things one constantly discovered about Lochalan.

Still, Edie's agitation was well-founded. There would be an empty stall with the castle's name on. Bare boards amid the soap and fudge. Nothing raised for the lifeboat fund. It wasn't, Sasha knew, the best note to leave on.

She was starting to pack up her things when Edie reappeared. Her face was flushed but there was something decisive about her expression.

"I've been thinking, Mrs Gordon." Edie's tone was agitated.

"Oh?" Sasha smiled encouragingly. "About the stall, you mean?"

"Yes. Why don't you put some of your

paintings on it? You've got hundreds of them," Edie added, talking very fast as if she feared to stop. "And they're wonderful, Mrs Gordon."

Sasha's hand flew defensively to her breast. "Oh Edie, I couldn't! They're, well, personal. They're not good enough to sell." Then, as Edie's eye remained fixed and unyielding, she added, more firmly, "Sorry. It's out of the question."

"It's a shame," Edie said, her arms folded. "All that work and nobody ever sees it. They're all views of Lochalan; people are bound to want to buy them."

"But those people can go out and see Lochalan whenever they like, the real thing," Sasha protested, terror now twisting her insides. "Honestly, Edie," she pleaded, "I'd rather show people my underwear than my pictures."

"There are lots of visitors from outside to the market," Edie pointed out. "And the ships' people, of course."

Sasha stared at her in horror, visions of some tanned and sophisticated international sailor sweeping an educated eye over her work.

"It's for charity," Edie went on, a steely glint in her eye. "The lifeboats..."

The very words she herself had used, Sasha recognised. Realising that, in her own way, she was being just as hysterical as Edie, something seemed to slide and shift within her. Realising she had no choice, she felt herself calm down.

Where was her perspective? It was

only the Tall Ships' market, hardly the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. And Edie was quite right, there were, if not hundreds, then certainly very many canvases of hers in the Castle, all of which would need moving after the sale.

But to where? She would be unable to bear them in London, reminding her of happier times. Perhaps getting rid of them now was best, after all.

"You're right, Edie," she said, crossing her fingers. "Let's get them out and have a look, shall we?"

The author says . . .

"This story is inspired by many family holidays in the North West Highlands of Scotland. I adore the mountains, the light on the lochs, the sense of being away from it all."

NEXT WEEK

Moira spots an opportunity to make her escape, while news about Alex shatters Sasha's world.