

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

# Wendy Holden

## \* Storms Over Lochalan \*

**Part Two:** Bad news throws Sasha into turmoil while Moira's unexpected meeting gives her a chance to escape Lochalan

**T**he Tall Ships were in. Great sleek white-sailed boats crammed the homely Lochalan harbour. Shining hulls worth millions jostled for space with battered trawlers and the Glasgow Kiss. The shorefront was a mass of stalls skirted by a moving press of people. The air resounded to the strains – and strains was the word, Moira scornfully thought – of the Lochalan Junior Pipe Band.

“OMG!” squealed Katie, her round eyes darting at the influx of sailors. “They’re better-looking than ever!”

Moira had given them only the most cursory of looks. She was genuinely uninterested in these swaggering newcomers in white trousers, blue jerseys and deck shoes. They were horribly over-confident with their superman height, smooth tans and perfect teeth. They stalked up and down as if they owned the place, as if little

**“What competition?” her dad demanded, looking at the letter**

Lochalan should be grateful to receive their overprivileged international attention. The thing was, little Lochalan obviously was, and to a degree that made Moira's toes curl.

She hadn't really wanted to come out, even. She had been hiding in her bedroom since the huge row with Dad this afternoon.

It had started when Douglas the postman brought a letter.

“You've won a competition,” he announced. Moira, while gratified by the news, was annoyed at the pre-opened envelope and letter sealed in a clear bag. “It was damaged in transit,” Douglas explained hastily when he saw her angry expression.

“What competition?” Dad demanded. “Some sort of clothes thing,” Douglas returned, and it was in this manner Moira learnt she had won Glossy magazine's annual Young Fashion Genius competition, with its prize of a month's work in the studios of a famous London designer.

Being told, in front of Douglas, that she would be going to London over Dad's dead body and if she wanted a job there was a farm shop to run, had been more than Moira could bear.

She had slammed upstairs and, once she had finished fuming, spent the afternoon plotting her escape.

She would get to London somehow. But how? She had no money, no means of transport, not even a bicycle.

**B**y the time Katie had finished her shift at the Spar and had come knocking on the door, Moira was sick of contemplating the white wall of her room and her equally bleak prospects.

Sulkily she had come down and, without saying anything to her parents,

slouched out of the house.

Now the two of them were in Fore Street, threading their way through the excited crowds and stalls of homemade fudge, pottery and soap that the craftspeople who lived in the hills made and brought for sale.

They were all greying plaits and hairy jumpers, Moira thought. And that was just the men! Some of these people, she knew, had come from the big cities originally. They had had proper jobs but had decided to chuck it all in and get back to nature and authentic values. Fancy giving up a life in somewhere like London in order to sit in a freezing cottage in Scotland and shove clay through sieves to make artisanal pottery.

She picked up speed as she noticed a stall with cheese sporting the familiar family label. A few days ago Dad had actually suggested she run a stall herself this year with the produce of his dairy on it.

“Do you good,” he claimed. “Give you some practice for when you run the shop.” Moira had not trusted herself to reply.

In the end, Dan the local baker had offered to stick the cheese on the trestle alongside his bannocks and stovies.

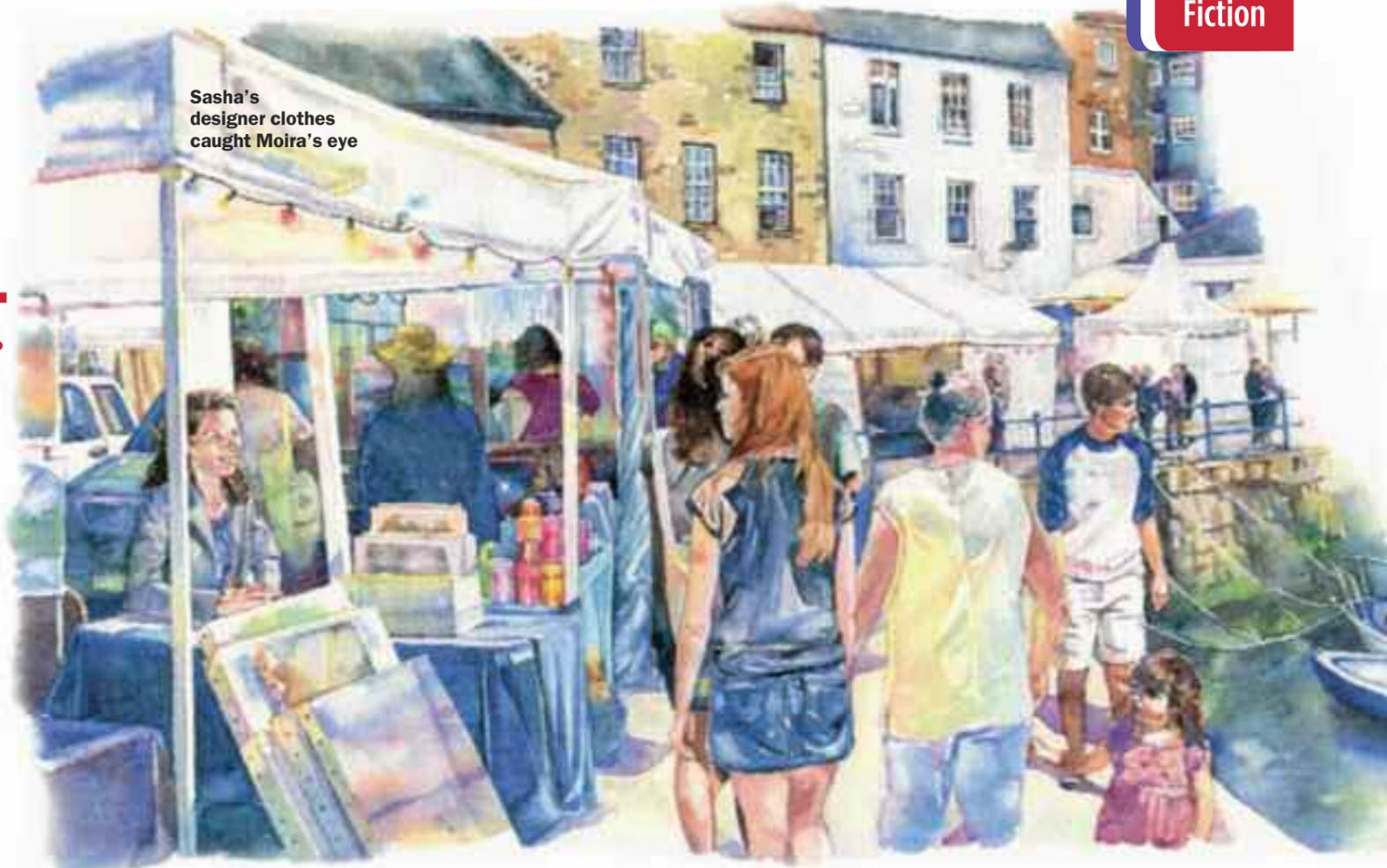
Moira wondered now if she hadn't been too hasty. While selling cheese was the last thing she wanted to do, the money would have been useful. She could have borrowed some of it for a train fare to London.

She noticed, as they drifted past, that there was something different about Mrs Gordon's stall.

Where the serried ranks of Edie McTavish's strawberry compote usually were lay rows of small, unframed canvases, facing upwards.

Moira was less interested in this than what Mrs Gordon was wearing, however. She always looked wonderful, although why she bothered in Lochalan Moira could not imagine.

She could see at a glance that the jacket was Prada. The dress could have been either Armani or Chanel. Would Sasha Gordon really rather be here,



Sasha's designer clothes caught Moira's eye

Moira wondered, than drifting through the boutiques of Sloane Street? It seemed incredible. Impossible.

Pausing nearby to pick up a multicoloured stump of home-made candle on the stall of a multicoloured stump of a woman, Moira concluded that all these people must be crazy.

**S**itting behind her table, Sasha was smiling. She was enjoying herself hugely. There was a warm sense of community along the shorefront, above the trestle tables, under the strings of coloured bulbs. Red, blue, yellow, they glowed on the soap, candles and knitted jerseys arranged on the stalls around her.

The endless parade of people going past was fascinating, although the sailors tended in the main to leave Sasha cold. Most were very good-looking, but their air of wealthy arrogance was unattractive. She disliked the way some of the older ones stared at her rather directly.

“It's a real art form, mine,” the woman at the candle stall next door was saying earnestly. “I have to pour in the waxes one by one and let it set. It can take up to eight hours to build a candle.”

Sasha widened her eyes and tried to look impressed. Privately, she thought the

striped candles hideous, but it was nice to be accepted as a fellow artisan.

The man with the pottery, two stalls along, had also been interested in her technique and in exchange had talked at considerable length about his interest in seventeenth-century slipware.

**“I thought you were just one of those ladies who lunched”**

On the other side, an enormous woman with a grey pony tail presided over piles of shaggy mohair jerseys.

“I always knit in a deliberate mistake,” she told Sasha. “Like those Turkish rugs which would otherwise be too perfect.”

“Quite good, your pictures,” the candle woman called over. “They'd make nice tea towels.”

Sasha tried to take this remark as a compliment.

“I didn't realise you did this sort of thing,” the jumper woman added, waving a hand towards her paintings.

“I thought you were just one of those ladies who lunched.”

“I was, but there was nowhere to lunch round here,” Sasha returned with a good-humoured grin.

**B**eyond the moving line of passing people, a great coral feather boa of a sunset was stretched luxuriously out above the loch.

It really was such a beautiful place to live, Sasha thought. And impossible, ridiculous, that she wouldn't be living

here much longer. The estate agent had called just as she was leaving with the paintings. Two London couples, both wanting to come and view the castle next week. Both bankers...

Her glance dropped to her work. There were so many memories here, so many special moments. Lochalan at dawn, with a faint glow of orange ridging the mountains and dusting the rippling water. In the milky quiet of a misty morning. In the full blaze of a noon, the loch shining like polished silver. In the pink and yellow explosion of sunset...

The mobile phone in her bag now rang loudly out, breaking her reverie.

Sasha fished it out abstractedly, wondering if it was one of her sons. Unlikely. Milo had texted earlier to say he

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was leaving Capri for Antibes, while Felix seemed to be doing an endless round of summer festivals.

It seemed even likelier that it was Alex, and yet, surprisingly, it was.

"How are you?" Sasha asked, expecting the usual hurried reply, and Alex to ring off again in five seconds flat, saying he had a meeting, or a plane to catch, or his secretary was waving and it was an important call. Sometimes it seemed they had not properly connected for years.

"Actually," Alex said, "I've been better."

A judder of alarm shot through Sasha. "Why? What's the matter?"

Incredulously she listened as Alex described how, earlier that day, he had stood up suddenly after a business lunch

## "What are they testing you for?" she asked her husband anxiously

in a restaurant, felt the world shift around him, then fainted.

"But it's nothing to worry about. Probably the prawns."

Sasha's hand tightened around the phone. Her mind was rushing. Alex was never ill. In a business where people routinely fell by the wayside, unable to take the pace, he seemed invulnerable and prided himself on his resilience.

"Have you been to the doctor?" she asked, as calmly as she could.

"I'm calling you from the hospital," Alex returned.

"Hospital!" She said this so loudly the candle woman stared at her curiously.

"Look, it's fine, OK?" He sounded almost amused. "I'm outside, between blood tests."

### The author says . . .

"I'm interested in how the people who live in a village like Lochalan connect with the summer visitors. Scotland is very beautiful, but what's it like in the remoter parts if you're a teen? So I invented ambitious local girl Moira and contrasted her with rich city escapist Sasha."

Sasha stood up so quickly she almost knocked the table over. "I'm coming down," she announced immediately.

Her mind jumped around the logistics. The nearest station was sixty miles away and a two-hour drive. She would have missed the last one to London. She began to think, wildly, about planes, but Alex interrupted, in his decisive way.

"You can't get here tonight. And there's no need. It's OK, I promise you. They're just doing a few tests. Nothing to worry about."

"What are they testing you for?" Sasha asked. There was a swooping feeling in her insides which she recognised as terror. For all the warmth of the evening, her teeth were starting to chatter.

"This and that. I'm not sure. But it's

OK, honestly."

"Have you told the boys yet?"

Alex's answer was pitched somewhere between incredulous and amused.

"Of course not."

There's no need to worry them. It's probably something and nothing."

He wound up the call saying he had to go, the nurse had appeared and he was due back inside for more tests.

"I'll call you later," he promised.

She replaced the phone in her bag and stared out from behind her stall.

"Everything alright?" asked the jumper woman.

"Fine," Sasha muttered, automatically. Her mind was racing, however. How ill was Alex? Robustly healthy himself, he was notorious for brushing other people's sickness under the carpet. He had never had any patience if either of the boys was poorly. But in truth, secretly, Sasha had worried about her husband's health for some time. It had seemed impossible that he could continue year after year, absorbing so much stress, working so hard, without some deleterious effect.

"...have to build up the colours one by one," she could hear the candle woman saying to some particularly supercilious-looking sailors.

Fainting? In a restaurant? Sasha knitted her brows. Oh, Alex! Alone and ill in London. She forced herself to calm

down. Something and nothing, he had said. Was he telling the truth? For all his reassuring words, she could not shake off a feeling of foreboding.

She could, she worked out, get to London by tomorrow teatime if she got the first train to the airport in the morning. Lost in anxious planning, she did not notice a small, neat woman with dark hair stop and speak.

"Sorry?" she said, coming back down to earth and looking up into a pair of level grey eyes flanked by a well-cut black bob with touches of white at the temple. The woman's clothes were simple and casual, but Sasha's educated eye lingered on the cashmere and tweed.

"I just wanted to introduce myself," the woman said in educated tones. "I understand you own Lochalan Castle."

Sasha nodded, feeling rather intimidated by the woman's brisk manner.

"I'm Jane Heron-Scott. My husband and I have just bought Drum Lodge, the other side of the loch..."

"Oh, yes," Sasha said vaguely, wishing the woman, perfectly pleasant though she seemed, had picked another time for her social overtures.

She knew Drum Lodge, of course, the other local big house. She had met many of its chatelaines over the years and had, so far as it went, taken them under her social wing.

None ever stayed more than a year before hightailing it back to Chelsea. And now Sasha herself was going, there was doubly no point striking up a friendship.

"Are these your own work?" Jane Heron-Scott asked in her decisive cut-glass tones.

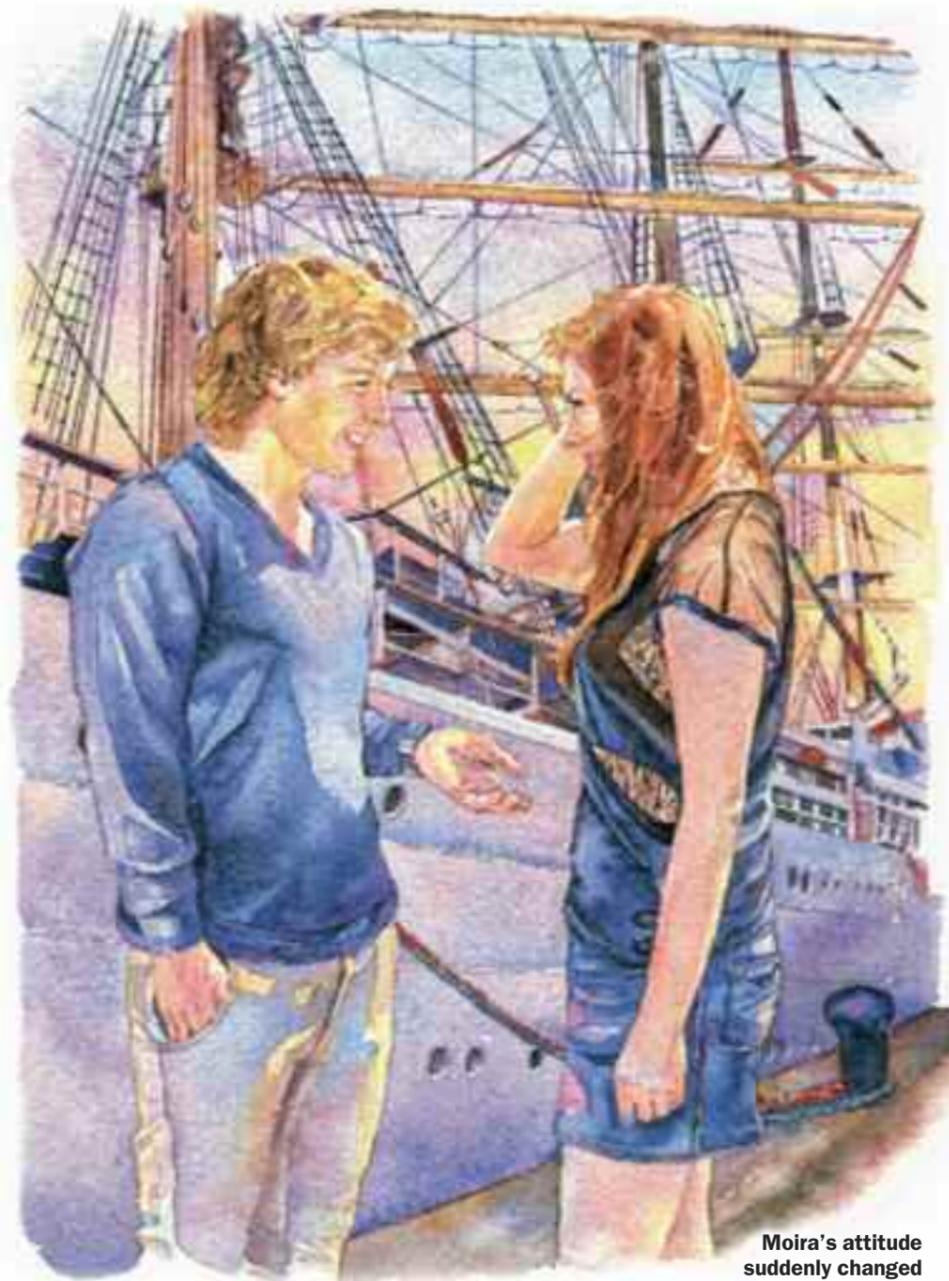
"Yes," Sasha wished she would go away. She wanted to think about Alex, plan her trip, not exchange niceties.

"I thought we could have lunch," Jane Heron-Scott said. She opened a smart, plain wallet and handed over an engraved card.

One of the pushier ones, Sasha privately concluded. She knew the type. Married to high-powered lawyers or City men, they conducted themselves with all the importance and pomp of their husbands. Their speciality was running ferociously aspirational social lives.

*Well good luck to her round here with that,* Sasha thought.

Look at him over there, ooh, he's gorgeous Moira..." Beside her, Katie was wittering on. "So tall and with an amazing tan. Don't look now," Katie



Moira's attitude suddenly changed

dropped her voice to an urgent hiss and dug Moira hard in the ribs. "But he's staring at you!"

Moira pretended not to hear and stalked onwards. Her way was suddenly blocked, however, and she found herself glancing briefly at the obstruction.

He was tall, in his early twenties, burnished to a golden bronze and his eyes of the clearest green were now directed at her.

Moira stared back. Her instinct was to say something cutting, but another, much stronger instinct made her pause. She felt, beside her, Katie squeeze her arm and melt away.

"Hey," he said, his laughing gaze holding hers. "I'm Anton. What's your name?"

"Moira," she said sulkily, noticing that her friend Katie had tactfully disappeared into the crowds.

## Moira softened, suddenly aware of the opportunity that had arisen

"Well, Moira," he said, in a mid Atlantic drawl with a hint of the Teutonic about it. "How's about you show me round a bit before we weigh anchor tomorrow morning?"

She was about to snap back that he couldn't weigh anchor soon enough, but then the green eyes crinkled and Anton spoke again in his stiff English.

"You know, I like your style, Moira. You're the kind of girl that appeals to me."

As Moira stared at him, torn between incredulous laughter and anger at his presumption, Anton went on. "Come on, Moira. You're the best-looking girl in this place. I'm going to need something to think about all the way down the

Eastern seaboard. Our next stop after this is the River Thames."

Moira was about to tell him to throw himself right in it, but then his last three words replayed themselves in her head.

"You're going to London?" she said.

He nodded, grinning. "Sailing up in formation. They're going to have to open Tower Bridge for the tallest ones," he added complacently. "It's going to be quite a sight."

He had all Moira's attention now. "Wow," she said, admiringly. "That sounds amazing. What did you say your name was? Anthony?"

"Anton." He seemed not to have particularly noticed her dramatic change of attitude. He did not, Moira thought, seem to be the noticing sort in general. So much the better. Somewhere, at the back of her mind, the outline of a plan was beginning to form.

"Anton," Moira repeated, her tones honeyed. "Well, that's wonderful."

He nodded, content, she saw, to bask in her admiration. He obviously considered it his due.

"Yes, I'd love to show you round Lochalan," Moira said. "It should take exactly five minutes."

He stared at her, uncertain for a second.

"You are joking, yes? I am meaning I would like to get to know you a little better, Moira. You are a very beautiful girl." He looked her up and down in a way that left little doubt as to what he meant.

Moira, who had little doubt herself now what she planned to do, met his gaze.

"I can't think of anything nicer, Anton."

It was all so simple. Really, the convenience of it was astonishing. She could hardly believe that such an opportunity had fallen into her lap.

If Anton's next stop was London, well, all she had to do was hitch a lift. She just needed to get on his boat, whichever one it was.

### NEXT WEEK

Alex's illness changes the face of their lives together while Moira's desperation drives her to take a dangerous risk.