

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

# Wendy Holden

## \* Storms Over Lochalan \*

**Part Three:** Moira's plans seem thwarted, but she's not giving up her dream, while Sasha's life takes a whole new direction

Walking quickly it wasn't far to the small, ancient harbour, where tiny fishing vessels with their hand-painted hulls and shaky lettering bobbed apologetically alongside the white and chrome Tall Ships. Most hand-painted and shaky of all was Cameron's boat, Glasgow Kiss.

Anton paused before the biggest Tall Ship of all, a gleaming leviathan called Don Juan.

"Hey, Moira," he murmured in his transatlantic accent, dropping his head to hers, "Why don't I show you around? No-one else will be there."

For a second, as he tugged her up the gangplank, Moira wondered whether what he obviously expected was too high a price to pay. But then the thought of spending the rest of her life immured in Lochalan propelled her onwards.

Anton led her across a varnished wooden deck to where a small hole led down to the compartments below.

"Somewhere quiet for us to... talk," he grinned suggestively over his broad shoulder as he climbed down the ladder.

**"Talk?" Anton murmured gently. "What is there to talk about?"**

At the foot of the ladder was a small wooden room. It contained a small white bed with a curtained space below.

As she joined him, his mouth clamped on hers, cutting off her air supply.

"You wear funny clothes, Moira," he grumbled into her hair. She hid a smile.

He was struggling with the retro-bondage-effect top she had copied from the August Vogue fashion pages.

"I thought we were going to talk," she said, feigning surprise.

"Talk?" Anton murmured pulling her close. "What is there to talk about?"

"There's something I want to ask you, Anton." She hesitated slightly before continuing. "Can you take me to London with you?"

Anton stopped mid-grope. His expression, in the half-darkness, was shocked.

"Of course not," he said, pushing his hair back awkwardly. "We are not allowed passengers. Not under any circumstances."

She ducked from the circle of his arms. Blast it. And she had been so close. She'd been sure this was the answer. How would she get to London now?

"Moira? Moira! Where are you going?" Anton was yelling into empty space, however. She had scrambled out, was across the deck and hurrying down the gangplank within seconds.

Excuse me, I'm looking for Ward Three," Sasha asked an overburdened-looking woman clutching a clipboard and wearing a green hospital overall.

"Go-out-the-way-you-came-in-round-to-the-right-double-back-to-the-left-go-to-the-end-of-that-corridor-turn-

left-again-and-take-the-third-lift-on-the-right-up-to-the-fourth-floor," said the woman in a breathless rush, hardly breaking pace as she swept on down the shiny hospital corridor.

Alex was lying back against his pillows and looking as grey as one of his City suits. He smiled at her wanly and raised a hand.

"How are you?" she asked, unsure what else to say.

"Fine."

As she looked sceptically back at him he pulled a face and said, "Actually, to tell you the truth, the doctor says I'm lucky to have escaped a heart attack."

"A heart attack?" Sasha echoed. The floor of the ward seemed suddenly to fall away beneath her. She gripped the sticky metal arms of the chair for support.

Alex extended a hand to cover hers. It felt trembly and hot compared to the cool, firm grip she was used to.

"The doctor's told me I have to give up before I kill myself."

"Stop what?" Sasha asked. Alex drank relatively lightly, and he didn't smoke. What was there to give up?

"Well, work. Obviously."

"Work?" For a moment, the bright overhead striplights whirled above Sasha. "That bad?" She had long resented his workload of course. But the idea of him not working at all was a very different thing.

"And if I give up the job we'll have to give it all up," Alex went on. "I won't be able to run a Belgravia townhouse and a Scottish castle." His face was creased with worry. His voice was fretful, frightened, even. "Sasha! What are we going to do?"

"It'll be fine," Sasha soothed, her calm voice belying her panic.

Her worst fears were realised. Alex really was ill. Iller than she had ever imagined. She wanted to scream and cry or, alternatively, put her head in the sand and refuse to accept it.

Alex had never been ill before. Could there be some mistake? Things like that



**BEST SELLERS' FICTION BONANZA**

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were always happening in hospitals. Fired with sudden hope, she looked at her husband searchingly.

But there was no mistaking Alex's grey pallor, his sunken eyes, the air of utter fatigue and defeat. She must accept the truth, and her own responsibilities. This was no time for self-indulgence.

Who would support them? *She would*, Sasha unhesitatingly decided. She would be the strong one now, it was her turn. Alex had always been the provider, the rock, the eternally reliable. But now he was vulnerable, incapable, frightened. She must protect him, she must be the provider now.

Never mind how, never mind with what. Sasha swallowed hard and, with a mighty effort, summoned what inner steel she had. Whatever lay ahead, she would face it.

Almost to her surprise, she felt

immediately more in control and found that she could think more clearly. She realised that, actually, both properties need not go after all. London would be the house to sell, obviously. But Scotland they could keep.

Her spirits rose and, despite the situation, soared ecstatically as the arguments for this plan stacked up.

Was not a spell in the Highlands exactly what Alex required? Doctor's orders. Rest. Peace. Time and space to get better, away from the nearest mobile phone signal, even.

Sasha glanced speculatively at her husband who lay, eyes closed in the bed beside her. She could guess what he would say; the case against. That the castle required considerable upkeep, far more than two unemployed people could afford. They would need some money coming in from somewhere.

Sasha racked her brains for the answer. Something would turn up, she was sure. But what?

She was distracted from her thoughts by Alex coughing. He had drunk some water and it had gone down the wrong way. There were no tissues at his bedside. Sasha rummaged in her coat pocket and fished out her hanky. As she passed it to Alex, something small and bright blue fluttered down on the bed.

He snatched it up. "What's this?" The card from Jane Heron-Scott, Sasha saw.

"Oh," she said vaguely. A woman at the Lochalan Ships Fair gave it to me. She's bought Drum Lodge."

It all seemed years ago already, Sasha felt. And to think she had tried to sell her paintings. She would have to come up with some infinitely better idea now.

But Alex's wasted air seemed momentarily replaced with some of his old fire. He pelted her with questions.

Sasha told him about her painting stall at the festival and Alex, to her

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astonishment, seemed electrified.

"Who is Jane Heron-Scott?" Sasha asked, looking puzzled.

Perhaps Alex was delirious. He was struggling to sit up in his bed now. Perhaps she should call for one of the nurses.

"She's one of the most powerful women in the City," Alex was gasping. "A well-known art collector as well. Did you say she was looking at your paintings?"

Sasha nodded, slowly. "She wanted to have lunch."

He was shaking his head in amazement. "I'd heard something about her buying a place in Scotland. Looking for business opportunities."

"She didn't say anything about opportunities," Sasha pointed out,

## "If she wants to go into business, you'll be in the big league, Sash"

feeling it was important to rein him back in. "Just lunch, that's all."

"Jane never does just lunch," Alex snorted. "If she wants to see you, you can bet you've got something she wants. Some idea she wants to put to you."

He was looking at her now with a new, unfamiliar expression on his face. After some seconds Sasha realised that it was respect.

"If she wants you to go into business with her, Sash, you'll be in the big league."

The world had looked, for a while, a really dark place to Moira. Following her disappointment on the

Don Juan it seemed as if all escape routes had closed.

She had walked back home, stomping sulkily along streets lined with low white cottages, some with old ships' anchors sunk into the small gardens in front. They seemed to echo her own situation. Intended for travel, for adventure, yet stuck in Lochalan for ever.

She had been halfway home when the idea hit her. Why had she not realised? She could go with Anton, after all. He would take her down to London tomorrow morning, just as she'd planned.

There was just one tiny change. He would not know about it. There was no need. She knew which boat was his now, had been able to recce inside it as well. She was small, slim, easy hidden. The



little cubbyhole under the bed would do just fine.

She would simply stow away!

There was, Moira decided, no time to lose. She was pretty sure Anton had returned to the harbourfront; if she went now, the Don Juan should be empty. She turned on her heel

and hurried back the way she had come.

The sun had almost set now, purple clouds underlit by its sinking fires were blanketing the once-blue sky. Don Juan, when she arrived there, was rocking quietly in the gathering darkness. There were no lights down below.

From the near distance of Fore Street, the singing had started, the Lochalan Junior Pipe Band was still going strong. Moira felt a sweep of what was almost affection for them; after all, she wouldn't be hearing them again. Not for a long time.

She took her shoes in both hands and, heart banging, hurried up the gangplank. Her breath ragged in her ears, she listened again for signs of life. Nothing.

Minutes later, she was down the ladder, in the cabin and under the bed, yanking the curtains shut behind her.

It was hot, dark and unpleasant-smelling, a storeroom of sorts, crammed with rope, boxes and bags.

Moira forced herself to concentrate on the glories ahead, how, when she arrived in London, she would make her way to Glossy magazine, claim her prize and start her fashion career.

The kerosene rope smell, plus the rocking, was making her feel sick. But all this would be worth it, she reminded herself. When she was Designer of the Year and owner of a West End boutique, she could tell the amazing story of her escape. The fashion mags would love it.

Her heart picked up speed as noises approached. Voices, and they were getting closer. Anton's, she recognised.

"Let's go down here," he was saying to someone in tones she also recognised. Persuasive, seductive. "We can... talk. It is private."

Through the crack in the curtains Moira now saw Anton's bare feet. They were mere inches from her nose. His toenails needed attention. She squeezed herself, desperate not to laugh. Her amusement turned to mild indignation when she heard Katie's voice.

"Ooh, Anton!" her friend giggled.

Moira screwed up her face, shut her eyes and stuck her fingers in her ears.

She awoke some time later, unsure what time it was. Everything was dark and she could hear the steady pulse of a boat engine. The vessel was moving; they must have left the harbour.

Anton and Katie were no longer on the bed above her.

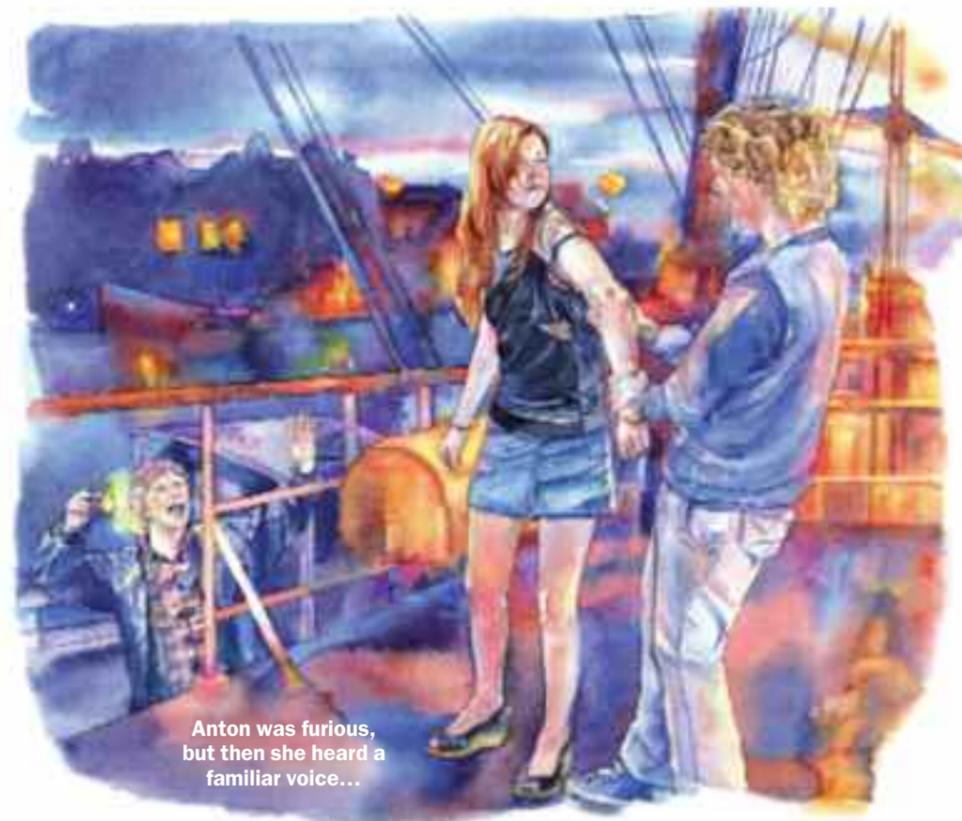
Despite the cramp now seizing her calves and the heaviness of her eyes, excitement soared within her. She was on her way! She had foiled all attempts to stop her. Her father's. Anton's. Everyone's.

Voices again. The cabin door opened, the light snapped on and a delicious terror now replaced Moira's excitement. But no, they could not find her here. She was safe.

"There is some rope under here," Anton was saying. A pair of white-trousered knees dropped to Moira's eyeline. Realising what was coming she tried, desperately, to scrabble backwards, but more boxes and bags pressed into her spine. The curtain was snatched aside and she found herself staring directly at him. She gave him a weak smile. "Surprise!"

Anton didn't smile back. His brows contracted in puzzlement, then leapt apart with shock.

"You!" he said, in a growl. "What are you doing here?"



Anton was furious, but then she heard a familiar voice...

The next few moments were hideously humiliating. She realised at once that no-one was about to see the funny side, or even be very polite.

At Anton's cold, barked order she extracted herself, covered in dust, and followed him sullenly back up the ladder where she stood on the deck, head mutinously bowed.

"What do you think you were doing?" Anton was shouting. "I told you we took no passengers!"

It was, Moira realised, as if he had never tried to kiss her. His voice was full

of fury, beneath which she sensed the panic of one desperately battling to escape responsibility.

Moira tuned out of his shouting. She felt a strange serenity; she no longer cared what happened. They could make her walk the plank if they liked.

It was dark on deck. Above her head, the great sails loomed white against a black sky scattered with stars. Any other time, Moira thought, she would have admired them. She loved the constellations, many of which Cameron had taught her to recognise.

The stars had, in fact, been the inspiration for the winning fashion designs she had sent to Glossy magazine, although she may as well forget those now. Forever.

She closed her eyes, still thinking of Cameron, possibly the only Lochalan person who had ever really understood her. They had had a laugh on his boat, no question. He shared her irreverent sense of humour.

It was strange, but she could almost hear his voice.

"Ahoy there!" Yes, quite definitely Cameron's voice. Coming from the boat's stern. "Ahoy there!" he roared, like a pirate about to

board. "Stop your engines!" Over the shining rails of the Don Juan, some few feet away in the dark sea, was the familiar outline of Glasgow Kiss. Still shouting, Cameron pulled his boat alongside.

"You've got a girl on board! One of our girls!" he added, in a eighteenth-century touch that Moira afterwards decided was rather thrilling.

"Your parents are going crazy," Cameron yelled at Moira. "The whole village is going crazy, looking for you. It was me who realised where you might be. With Lover Boy, there."

Moira did not look at Anton. She was not returning to Lochalan without a

fight. While relieved to see Cameron, she was not willing to exchange the frying pan for the fire.

"I'd go mad if I went back there," she shouted back.

"I don't think you need worry about that," Cameron bawled. "Your parents have finally realised you're serious about leaving. Now if you'll just come back with me I'm sure we can work out the details with them."

**Six Months Later...**

The door of the art gallery pinged. Sasha looked up from checking the final proofs of the new catalogue. "Jane! I thought I heard the helicopter."

The gallery's co-proprietor smiled. "Flying visit. I was in Edinburgh for a meeting and you know I can never resist popping in."

The Lochalan Castle Art Gallery had taken off from the start, a perfect storm of circumstance contributing to its stunning success.

Jane had jumped at the opportunity to finance a gallery of Sasha's work. Managed by Alex and with the benefit of the location, it'd been a triumph.

A tearoom had been opened recently to accommodate the coach tours; Edie was in her element.

Sasha had been telling Felix all about it that morning, but her eldest son had had news of his own. He had landed a job as deputy fashion editor on *Vogue*; the magazine, he told her, was very excited about a new designer called Moira McDonald who – and the amazement in Felix's voice was palpable – actually came from Lochalan. She'd won a magazine competition, and while only recently arrived in the capital, was making great waves.

Did his mother know her?

"I've seen her around," Sasha said. "Lovely redhead. Used to wear rather extraordinary clothes."

"What with her and your gallery," Felix mused, "there's obviously more to boring old Lochalan than I always thought."

Sasha suppressed the giggle in her voice. "You could say that, darling. You could say that."

### NEXT WEEK

**It Has To Be Perfect** is a wonderfully moving story of motherly love. Have some tissues at the ready!

### BOOK OFFER

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