



THE  
MacInnes  
AFFAIR

BLAIR MCDOWELL

“I don’t understand what’s taking Lachlan so long. It’s been three days.” Elspeth paced back and forth in the library.

Her father glanced up impatiently. “You are wearing a hole in the rug. Sit down, for God’s sake. Mayhap when he observed the condition of the castle, he had second thoughts about his marriage.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Father. Lachlan has no money concerns. If the castle cannot be made livable, we’ll return to Lochleigh. I quite like it there.”

Her father didn’t answer, and Elspeth continued her pacing. “I wish Hamish were here. He’d know what to do. I’ll send a message to Abhainn.”

“Stop this foolishness!” her father bellowed. “Clearly your husband has chosen to abandon you. He has seen the wreck of a castle he dreamed about when he married you and has gone on to greener pastures!”

He got up and stormed out of the room.

Elspeth stared after her father, speechless. He had no idea of who or what Lachlan was, or what their marriage meant to them.

She had to get a message to Abhainn. Her father must have writing paper somewhere. She walked around to the other side of her father’s desk and opened the top drawer. There, on top of bills and scraps of paper, sat Lachlan’s ring. The ring he never, ever, removed from his finger.

She sat in stunned silence. If her father had Lachlan’s ring, Lachlan was dead. He would never have parted with it while still he lived.

### **Reviews for *THE MACINNES AFFAIR***

“The finest kind of time-slip romance, one where the dive into the past illuminates but does not overshadow...the present...a marvelous story.”

*~Marlene, Reading Reality*

“The two stories evolving simultaneously allows the reader to leap centuries. Even if you are not an Outlander fan, it is still...entertaining and exciting.”

*~Susan Johnston*

“[It] captured and held my attention from beginning to end. Blair McDowell’s descriptions brought the book alive, while the dual-time line added depth...a dashing hero, a charming lady, warring clans, a Scottish estate.”

*~Kristina Anderson*

# The MacInnes Affair

by

Blair McDowell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

## **The MacInnes Affair**

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## **Dedication**

To Jeanette and Sherry,  
the two women who keep me writing

~\*~\*~

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*~Blair MacDowell*

It is not while beauty and youth are thine own,  
And thy cheeks unprofan'd by a tear,  
That the fervour and faith of a love can be known,  
To which time will but make thee more dear!  
No, the heart that has truly loved, never forgets,  
But as truly loves on to the close;  
As the sunflower turns on her god, when he sets,  
The same look that she turn'd when he rose!

*~Thomas Moore, 1775*



## Chapter One

### *The Present*

Lara gaped at the forbidding stone fortress before her. This was not at all what she'd expected of a bed and breakfast. She turned to the taxi driver. "Are you sure this is the right address?"

"Aye, lass." The driver was unloading her luggage. "You said Athdara. There is only one Athdara, Athdara Castle. That'll be twelve pounds."

Lara counted out the fare and added a tip. Was one supposed to tip in Scotland? She should have found that out before leaving Canada.

She climbed the wide marble stairs to the entrance. Beside the massive front door was a small hand-lettered sign, "Please ring and enter". She pressed the button and heard a clamoring that would have awakened the dead. Hitching her backpack up on her shoulder and wheeling her one small bag behind her, she opened the door and stepped inside to a square, high-ceilinged, oak-paneled hall. A massive stag-horn chandelier illuminated what would otherwise have been a very dark space.

An austere, middle-aged woman bustled in and introduced herself. "Welcome to Athdara Castle, Miss MacInnes. I'm Mrs. Murchison, the housekeeper. Lady Glendenning asked me to apologize for not being here

to greet you. She will see you at dinner. Just leave your bags here in the hall. Ewan will take care of them. Come this way, please.”

Lara followed the tall, dignified, and rather forbidding Mrs. Murchison, up a flight of stairs with polished wood bannisters that felt like satin under her touch, down a series of a long, dark corridors lined with portraits. Past Glendennings? At the end of the hallway, Mrs. Murchison opened a door with an old-fashioned brass key and stepped back to allow Lara to enter.

Lara caught her breath. Dominating the tower room was a massive four poster bed draped in plaid and dressed in crisp white linens. She could almost see Mary, Queen of Scots in that bed, awaiting her lover, Bothwell. How could she, a cowgirl from Alberta, possibly sleep in such a bed?

Her gaze slid past wainscoted walls of dark oak to the stone fireplace. Its blaze was welcome after the damp of the day. She strolled over to warm her chilled hands in front of the flames. She had not expected Scotland to be so cold in June.

Turning, she ran her hand across the soft leather of a wing chair placed in front of the fireplace, a lap robe haphazardly tossed over its high back, dark blue squares on a bright green field. The Clan Glendenning tartan? She would enjoy sitting in that chair, in front of the fireplace with the lap robe over her knees.

On the other side of the room, pallid sunlight poured through six narrow, leaded-glass windows set in the circle of the tower. Weren't tower rooms used to house prisoners in the past? She was sure she'd read something like that. Pretty sumptuous surroundings for a prisoner.

“Will there be anything else?”

Mrs. Murchison’s question brought Lara back to the present with a start. “No, thank you. This is lovely.”

“Dinner is at eight. Drinks in the drawing room at seven.” Mrs. Murchison withdrew.

Her bags were already in her room. How had they done that? Back stairs?

She was staying in a castle. Nothing her mother had said about her friend’s bed and breakfast had prepared Lara for this opulence. She gazed out the bank of windows. A manicured stretch of lawn was defined by boxwood and low stone walls, and beyond the walls, a forest of pine and birch beckoned enticingly. In the distance, high hills were covered in intense green and yellow.

She had grown up in the shadow of the Canadian Rockies. These foothills of the Scottish Highlands were very different. They had rounded tops rather like upside-down bowls, not the jagged peaks of the mountains she knew. And although they were very green, the green appeared to be some kind of ground cover. The castle grounds were edged by forest, but the distant hills were largely denuded of trees, and they gave the impression of being ancient. No other houses were visible. How large was this estate? She would enjoy exploring the grounds. Perhaps she had time for a short walk before dinner. She was tired from the overnight flight but was too keyed up to rest. Some fresh air might help clear the cobwebs from her brain. Hastily she took off her wrinkled travel clothes, pulled on a pair of jeans and an oversized sweater, and tucked her long dark hair up into her Calgary Stampede baseball cap. She met no one as she made her way back

through the hallways with their many dark portraits, down the winding stairs, across the broad entrance hall and out the front door. She was really here. She was in Scotland.

She glanced back at the inn. Athdara was definitely a castle, even though it lacked the moat, the multiple towers and battlements she had seen in pictures of Scottish castles. Built of square-cut gray stone, four stories high, it sported a fat round turret on each of its four corners. Her room was in one of those. The narrow windows in the turrets would at one time have been for shooting arrows down on the enemy. In her mind she could see red-coated British soldiers surrounding the castle, and the Glendennings at those narrow windows, bravely defending their castle. She laughed. She had a habit of letting her imagination run away with her.

Which way should she go? She stood and gazed around her for a few moments. The grounds were beautiful, but the forest beckoned her.

Soon she found herself surrounded by trees, fragrant pine and slender birches and feathery rowan trees—mountain ash—with their shiny red berries. The Scots Broom was in full bloom, its clusters of brilliant yellow flowers lighting the forest. She followed a narrow ribbon of pathway lined with plump junipers and wild cranberries and bog-myrtle. She broke off a small twig of bog myrtle and inhaled its bitter-sweet scent.

Birds chattered in the trees. Ravens? She glanced up as a heron took flight, its blue wings spread wide as it soared out over the treetops.

Entranced, she continued along the increasingly rough trail. Abruptly, she emerged from the wood to

some kind of promontory. Below her, a swift-flowing river bubbled over rocks, shimmering in the setting sun. On the other side, trees were reflected in its cool green depths, the sun casting long shadows as it settled behind the hills.

She'd better be heading back. Mrs. Murchison had said "drinks at seven." She studied the terrain. To her surprise, there was a broad, well graveled path along the cliff's edge that disappeared into the wood in the direction of the castle. It might be faster than the overgrown track she had followed here. With a last glance at the beauty of the setting, she set out at a brisk jogging pace.

She heard the drumming of hooves before her mind registered what the sound was. A magnificent black stallion came thundering toward her out of the forest, its rider oblivious to her standing in the middle of what she realized too late was a bridle path.

She threw herself to the side, out of the way of the oncoming beast, and landed in the middle of a large yellow flowering bush.

"*Whit ye daein, ye dunderheed!*" The man brought his horse to a halt. The horse began to sidle, and the rider tightened his grip on the reins, bringing him firmly under control. "This is nae a footpath!"

Painfully, Lara tried to extract herself from the bramble. Her right hand was already bleeding from a long sharp thorn embedded in it, and another thorn had pierced the seat of her jeans. She struggled, unable to get a foothold. A thorn pushed through her shoe into her right foot. The sharp penetrating thorns were everywhere. Her cap fell off and her dark hair tumbled around her shoulders.

“Jesus! Yer a lass.” He was off his mount in a flash, kneeling by her side. “Stop struggling. Yer only making it worse. I’ll have to lift ye out. Gorse is a painful bed.”

He reached into the bush, carefully slipped his arms under her shoulders and knees, and lifted her free of the clinging barbs. He set her down on her feet only to have her knees give way. Quickly his arms came around her, supporting her.

“I’m sorry,” Lara said. “I should have been more attentive. I should have realized this was a bridle path. I was just so entranced by the woods and the river and...what is that horrible bush? I thought it was broom.”

“Nae.” He shook his head in apparent disbelief that anyone could be so naive. “It’s gorse. Any Scot knows the difference. The blooms appear alike, but the gorse is mean. I knew a man once had to be lifted out of a large patch of gorse by a crane.”

Tears filled her eyes. She hated herself for it, but this was just the last straw. It had been an endless overnight flight from Calgary and a long train trip from Edinburgh, and she had just arrived here, to be very nearly run down by the biggest horse she’d ever encountered. And to top it off, she’d fallen into a gorse patch and been yelled at in a language she didn’t understand, although the sentiment had come through loud and clear.

“Dinnae dae that! Please don’t cry. I canna stand a woman’s tears. Come. Ye ken how to ride?”

“I grew up on a ranch,” Lara said, searching unsuccessfully for a tissue in the pocket of her jeans. “I’ve been riding all my life.”

“Here.” He took a large linen square out of the pocket of his jacket. “Here. I’ll take ye back to the house and me mother will tend to yer scratches and wounds. I’m that sorry. I dinna expect anyone to be on the path, and I was giving Thunder his head.”

“Thunder?”

“He was a wee bit difficult to break. But he’s a fine ride now.”

Lara stared up at the horse that stood a good seventeen hands. They had never had one as big on the ranch. Then for the first time she examined the rider. She didn’t think she’d encountered one that big on the ranch either. He was well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and long legs. He had a thick shock of auburn hair, some strands of which fell over his forehead. His eyes were so dark a blue they bordered on black. He appeared as dangerous as his horse.

“So can ye stand?”

“Certainly, I can stand,” Lara said, propelling herself to her feet. She wobbled and almost toppled, but his arms came around her before she could once again land in the gorse.

“My foot...”

He lifted her in his arms.

A few minutes later, Lara was mounted behind the horseman, with her arms around his waist, as they traversed the bridle path at a sedate canter. At the stables, he dismounted, then lifted her down.

A stable hand appeared instantly.

“Ewan, can you take care of Thunder for me? The lass is injured.”

“Of course, milord.”

Lara was almost sorry their ride was over. She had

enjoyed being pressed against his broad back, every bounce of the horse making them bounce together. Who was he? The stable hand had referred to him as “milord.”

Over her protests, he carried her across the broad lawn and into the house, through a big stone kitchen, through a butlers’ pantry and formal dining room, to a large drawing room at the front of the castle. He was about to deposit her on a yellow silk damask sofa when Mrs. Murchison came into the room.

“What happened to Miss MacInnes? Good heavens, she’s injured!”

Lara glanced down. Indeed, her hand had been more than scratched. Blood was dripping from it. She held it against her shirt to keep the blood from ruining the blue and cream oriental carpet.

“I found her in the wood. Is it she belongs here?”

“She’s our personal guest. If you ever listened to what your mother said over breakfast ye’d know that. She’s Miss Lara MacInnes, arrived this afternoon from Canada.”

“Aye. I do remember somethin’ of the sort now. Where shall I put her?”

Lara listened as the man referred to her as if she were some sort of package to be deposited. He was insufferable. Her face flushed with embarrassment. “Put me down, please. Don’t disturb yourself with me another minute. I can make my own way to my room.”

He stared down at her wriggling in his arms, and a slight frown creased his forehead. “Dinna be daft. Ye canna stand.”

“She’s in the west tower room,” Mrs. Murchison instructed. “You can take her there. I’ll let your mother

know. Then go clean yourself up and dress. You're expected in the drawing room in an half hour and you know how your father is about tardiness."

With a grunted acknowledgement to Mrs. Murchison, the man carried Lara up the stairs and to her room. There he deposited her carefully on her bed.

He headed toward the door, then turned back. "I'm that sorry," he said. "I dinna mean to run ye doon."

Lara laughed in spite of herself. "Apology accepted."

Her eyes followed him as he beat a hasty retreat. She let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding. It was an incredibly sexy experience, being carried by a man.

A few minutes later Aileen Glendenning came rushing into the room. Her mother's friend, Aileen, was a tall, slender, willowy blond, exactly as Lara's mother had described her.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't here to greet you when you arrived this afternoon. Are you injured? My son said he nearly ran you down on the bridle path."

"I'm fine except for a few scratches I managed to get when I fell into the gorse. The jeans and long sleeves protected most of me."

"There's a nasty gouge on the back of your hand."

"My foot is more of a problem. I think a thorn may have pierced my shoe."

Aileen examined Lara's foot. "Right. The thorn has penetrated your shoe. I'll have to extract it before we remove your shoe. I'll try not to break it off in the process."

"Thank you. I hate to be a bother."

"It's no bother. I was a nurse before I married

Duncan and moved to Scotland. Your mother must have told you that's how we came to be friends. We were in nursing school together." Aileen was carefully working the thorn out of Lara's shoe as she spoke. "There it is." She held up the lethal-looking spike. "Now you can take off your shoe."

Lara did as instructed. Her foot was sore where the thorn had penetrated, and her shoe was wet with blood.

"I'll get you fixed up. I can't tell you how sorry I am. What an introduction to the Highlands! That son of mine with that half-wild stallion no one else can ride. He's a danger, that horse."

"He's the biggest horse I've ever seen," Lara said, thinking that Aileen's son was as much a danger as the horse. They were a well-matched pair.

Aileen poured peroxide on Lara's wounds to cleanse them. Then she applied antibiotic cream and bandaged them. "I think they shouldn't cause you any trouble. Are you sure there aren't any other thorns in you?"

Lara sat up and winced. She had a thorn in her behind. How embarrassing.

Aileen laughed. She gently edged the thorn out. "There. That should be better. I'll just clean and dress it like the others. But you may be a bit uncomfortable sitting this evening."

Wonderful. It hurt to stand, and it hurt to sit. What an impression she would make at dinner. So much for grace and elegance.

Aileen put the first aid supplies back in their box. "I could have a dinner tray sent up to you if you're uncomfortable."

"Thank you, but I'd prefer to join you downstairs."

No way did she want to miss this opportunity to observe Aileen's son when he wasn't shouting at her or carrying her. Was he always so overpowering?

Aileen smiled. "Good. Oh, and we do dress for dinner. The tourists expect it."

Lara recalled reading something online about Scottish Castle stays. They were elegant, upscale lodging, where well-heeled tourists could stay and play and pay.

Alone in her room Lara pondered. What exactly did "dress for dinner" mean? Was it like they did on *Downton Abby*? Too bad if it did. There wasn't much call for that at home on the ranch. She was relieved in retrospect that her mother had insisted she include a serviceable long skirt and a couple of nice dresses. Left to her own device, she'd have traveled with nothing but jeans and sweaters. She pushed through the offerings in her bag.

She chose a soft swinging blue dress, and with it, wore an antique gold and amethyst necklace, a gift from her mother five years ago, on her twenty-first birthday. She brushed her hair, so it hung to her shoulders, thick and dark, with just enough natural wave to make it bounce. She took time to touch lipstick to her lips and to apply soft eye shadow in a shade that made her eyes an even warmer brown than they were. She tried to tell herself that taking time over her appearance had nothing to do with the very attractive man who had nearly run her down earlier.

Fifteen minutes later, she limped down the stairs and followed the sound of voices to the room where her rescuer had first taken her. She realized she didn't even know his name.

He was standing when she entered the room. She froze, mesmerized by the sight. He was wearing kilts. They were both wearing kilts, father and son, and they were as alike as two peas in a pod, both tall, with legs like young tree trunks, broad shoulders that strained their formal black jackets, both overpoweringly masculine while wearing skirts. Extraordinarily handsome men. Aileen's husband's hair, soft amber shot with silver, was not quite the blaze of his son's.

Aileen, dressed in a simple long black gown, hurried forward and drew her into their circle. "Duncan, this is Eileen MacInnes' daughter, Lara. Lara, my husband, Duncan. And I believe you've met my son, Iain."

During the next few minutes, Lara answered Aileen's and Duncan's questions about her mother and the ranch in Alberta, and about her own work as a kindergarten teacher. She responded automatically, her mind buzzing and her eyes feasting on the richness of her surroundings. The huge stone fireplace surmounted by what she took to be the Glendenning crest, the rich dark colors of antique tapestries on the walls, the high-backed oak chairs with their barley-twist arms. And portraits, more portraits wherever she turned.

Other guests were drifting into the drawing room now, the men in dinner jackets, the women in long gowns or short elegant cocktail dresses. Duncan and Aileen greeted them each in turn, making them welcome and offering them small glasses of whisky.

Lara found herself alone with Iain. "How old is this castle?" she asked.

"This new one was built in the late seventeen hundreds," he answered. "The original fourteenth-

century castle was sacked, and the land confiscated by the Crown in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rising in 1745. Our branch of the Clan Glendenning fought for King George. But marauding gangs of the king's soldiers had no way of knowing we were not Jacobites. We were Scots and that was enough." He spoke as if he had personally witnessed the events of some three hundred years ago. "The land was restored to my family in the late seventeen hundreds. They lived in a small stone tenant house on the property until they recouped their fortunes through trade toward the end of the century, and this new house was built."

Lara laughed. "You can't imagine how strange it is to me to hear a castle dating from the eighteenth century referred to as 'this new house'."

"By the time they were married, me mother and father that is, the castle was once again in a pretty bad state of repair. They started working on it a bit at a time, installing central heating and hot water, private bathrooms, all the things tourists expect. And finally, twelve years ago, they listed the property as a Castle-Hotel. The income from that has allowed us to complete the restoration, and to maintain it. Can you even imagine what it costs to heat a place like this?"

Lara regarded the blazing fireplace. "But you use fireplaces, don't you?"

"They're more for show than for warmth. Our guests come from everywhere, and they pay verra well for the privilege of stayin' in a Scottish castle. They expect fireplaces and plaids and bagpipes, but they also expect heat and hot water on demand." His voice held a slightly bitter edge.

"You don't like it, do you, having to share your

home with strangers?”

“Can’t say as I do. On one hand I hate puttin’ on a show, but on t’other, it’s only four months a year. And it helps majorly with the expenses of keeping this place together and with running the other parts of the operation.”

“The other parts?”

“We have some seven hundred acres here and we run long-horned Scottish cattle. Ewan helps out, but I pretty much run that part. Then there are the stables. They’re Ewan’s and my responsibility with the help of some of the local lads. We have some of the finest horseflesh in Scotland.”

Lara burst out laughing. “I grew up on a ranch in Alberta. Horses and cattle and cowboys. I can’t believe I’m here on a ranch in Scotland, with horses and cattle and cowboys.”

“Well, I canna’ say I’ve ever heard Athdara Castle referred to as a ranch, and I’ve most certain never been called a cowboy.” For the first time a grin lit his face.

There was a sudden din from the hallway. “That’ll be our Ewan to pipe us in to dinner. Ye are with me.”

The man Lara had last met in the stables, now dressed in kilts, entered the drawing room and stood for a moment, playing bagpipes, feet marching in place in time. He crossed the room as double doors to the dining room opened. Duncan Glendenning took his wife’s arm and led her in, followed by Iain and Lara. The rest of the guests, some twenty in all, followed.

Later that night, Lara sank into the comfort of her bed, her head buzzing with the excitement of the evening, with all that had happened in the last six weeks. Had she done the right thing? Breaking her

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engagement to Edward, running off to Scotland?

She remembered Iain Glendenning and the tension and excitement she experienced just being in his arms as he carried her to her room, and her heart answered with a resounding “Yes!”