

**Northern Lights
over the Little
Highland Horse-Yard**

Rebecca Loebbert

IMPRESSUM

© 2024 Copyright by Verlag Federlesen.com

Text by Rebecca Loebbert

Cover & Illustrations by Rhiannan Redmond

Translated by Rebecca Loebbert & Megan Paterson

Website: federlesen.com

E-Mail: federlesen@gmx.ch

**Northern Lights
over the
Little Highland
Horse-Yard**

Rebecca Loebbert

Translated by Rebecca Loebbert & Megan Paterson

Verlag Federlesen.com

In loving memory of Eli the donkey

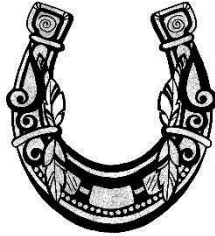
For Silvano, Jamil and Rosie.

INHALT

	Prologue	
1	Flirting is overrated	12
2	The new farrier	21
3	The singer	30
4	Announced visitors	38
5	Unexpected meeting	43
6	Among Scotsmen	48
7	Visitors	59
8	Ceilidh night	66
9	Emotional chaos	74
10	Lovesickness	77
11	Seeking comfort	87
12	The German guests	93
13	Burghead	114
14	Alternative Grad	130
15	Autumn storm	137

16	By candlelight	145
17	Tristan's birthday	159
18	Northern Lights	166
19	Halloween	171
20	Only friends	177
21	The dig	184
22	Eli	194
23	The marten	200
24	A night in the barn	208
25	Like a cut to the heart	216
26	Loch Maree	224
27	For all eternity	233
	Epilogue	238
	Amelia's Halloween pumpkin cake	243
	Acknowledgements	245
	ABOUT THE AUTHOR	247

Prologue



‘Well, are you enjoying yourself?’ asked a familiar voice behind Amelia. She wheeled round and found herself face to face with Jake’s beaming smile. She hadn’t even heard the actor coming closer over the music and laughter of the wedding party.

She smiled, genuinely happy to see him. ‘Yes, and you?’

Like her, Jake was from Germany, but while he had been in Scotland for the first time last winter and soon fallen in love with Amelia’s friend Alyson, Amelia had been living here for six years. She had graduated from the University of the Highlands and Islands two years ago and since then had been working as a tour guide at Urquhart Castle, where she had met and befriended Alyson.

‘I always enjoy myself,’ Jake remarked in his usual casual, slightly self-deprecating manner, ‘Although I’m afraid a certain bouquet of flowers has raised expectations,’ he grinned, looking towards Alyson, who was placing the bride’s bouquet she had caught in a

vase she had fetched from the farmhouse.

Amelia grinned in amusement. ‘Would you consider it? What would your groupies say if you tied the knot?’

Jake waved her off. ‘That chapter is over once and for all. I’m thirty-one now, time to grow up.’

‘Grow up? You?’ Amelia laughed.

Jake smirked mischievously. ‘You’ll see. But it doesn’t have to be right away, Alyson and I have known each other for just over half a year and I’ve been away filming for several months – we’ll take it slow. But maybe in a year or two ... who knows?’ He reached for one of the bowls of nibbles on the table. ‘And you? How are things with you on the love front?’ He raised an eyebrow as he popped two cashews into his mouth.

‘I’m a happy single,’ Amelia waved him off.

‘No Scotsman in a kilt whose sight makes your knees weak?’ asked Jake.

‘Pffft,’ said Amelia. ‘When I moved here, I was lured in with the false promises. They don’t all look like the Scots on the covers of those Highlander romance novels your girlfriend loves to read.’

‘What?’ Jake said, genuinely surprised. ‘Not all Scots walk around half naked day in, day out to show off their symmetrical, unrealistic six-pack?’

‘Unfortunately,’ Amelia sighed, then they both laughed.

‘Jake?’ Alyson came straight up to the two of them. ‘Time to show off those ceilidh dancing skills you picked up last December.’

‘Uh-oh,’ the actor said as Alyson grabbed him by the arm.

‘Sorry to kidnap your interlocutor,’ Alyson said to Amelia, who just shook her head in amusement as Jake pulled another one of his faces, as if he were a tragic hero resigned to his fate. She watched as the two of them made their way to the centre of the dance floor. Then her gaze continued to wander over the mountains of the Highlands in the backdrop, already turning purple where they were covered in heather. She loved the rugged beauty of this country, its history and the people, who were so much warmer and more relaxed than in the German Ruhrgebiet, where she came from. Life here was special and her friends replaced the family that lived on the other side of the sea.

But now, when she saw Alyson and Jake together, and not far from them the newlyweds Rowan and Tristan, whose love was evident in every look they exchanged and every touch they made, she felt that longing again for the first time in a long time. It must be so nice to have someone you could love so deeply. Her last relationship with a fellow student had been over three years ago and hadn’t lasted long.

She pushed the thought of it away and closed her eyes instead. She breathed in the fresh air. The wind blew a loose strand of hair into her face. A horse neighed a little way off. For a while, Amelia simply enjoyed the sun shining on her face. She heard the clinking of a glass, and when she opened her eyes, she saw that Tristan’s uncle, the Duke of Buccleuch, was about to make a speech.

Chapter 1: Flirting is over- rated



Three weeks later

Amelia held the door to the shop open for the visitors.

‘Thank you very much, it was very interesting,’ said a lady with a bun and pressed a coin into Amelia’s hand as a tip.

‘A very good tour,’ praised an elderly gentleman.

Amelia thanked them, wished everyone a good day and reminded them that there was a lunch special in the Café today for any members of *Historic Scotland*. When the last visitor who had taken part in her guided castle tour had passed her and entered the building, she closed the door behind her. She sighed and watched the chaotic hustle and bustle in the museum shop for a moment.

An old lady was looking at one of the silk scarves

with a Celtic knot pattern, a young man was getting advice on a whisky from her colleague and two teenage girls were giggling over a calendar showing Scotsmen doing yoga in kilts showing off their naked muscular torsos. A bored bus driver leaned next to the takeaway coffee machine, staring at his mobile phone, while a tartan-clad, bottle-blonde woman studied the price tag on a brooch as if the numbers could change if she only looked at it long enough. Outside, a child screamed, and Amelia watched through the glass door as they ran down the tarmac path to the famous Urquhart Castle, through which she had just led a group of forty tourists.

‘Do you want to take your break?’ Shona snapped her out of her thoughts. The chubby woman with the red face and grey bob smiled at her. ‘You look like you could do with something to eat.’

‘Good idea,’ said Amelia, only now realising that her stomach was growling. ‘Then I’ll take over the till so you can take your lunch break.’

She made her way through the crowd, pushed past the queue in the café and finally opened the door to the staff room. She put her leftover pasta from the previous day in the microwave, grabbed a fork from the cupboard and then sank down at a table with her food. Callum sat opposite her. At twenty-seven, he was a year younger than Amelia. His black hair curled down to just above his shoulders.

‘How’s it going?’ he asked, taking a bite of his sandwich.

‘Quite busy,’ Amelia replied. ‘As it always is in July.’ She speared some pasta onto her fork.

‘I sold an American woman nearly three hundred pounds worth of souvenirs to take home for her family,’ Callum mumbled with his mouth full.

Amelia frowned. ‘Well, if you got it, flaunt it!’

‘You’ve got something there,’ Callum replied, tapping his upper lip with his finger. Amelia wiped her own lip with the back of her hand to remove the tomato sauce that the pasta had left there.

‘Did you ever ...’ Amelia was interrupted because at that moment the door flew open and Andrew came rushing in. ‘Refuge!’ he shouted.

Amelia raised her eyebrows and Callum looked at his boyfriend questioningly. Andrew plopped down on the chair next to Callum, slapped his palms flat on the table and shook his head. ‘I’ll never wear a kilt to work again.’

‘What happened?’ Callum asked as he shoved the last piece of his sandwich into his mouth.

‘There was this woman, from Texas, she told me, who kept on pestering me while I was stocking shelves. *Oh my God, are you a real Scotsman?* she asked. I, professional as I am, answered her politely and continued sorting the bottles. Then all of a sudden I felt a hand on my back, moving downwards suspiciously ...’

‘Oh shit, she didn’t?!’ Amelia said, hiding her face in her hands.

‘Then what did you do?’ Callum wanted to know with wide eyes.

‘I turned round, brushed her hand off and asked her to leave me alone. She said, *Your kilt looks dirty* –

would you like me to wash it for you? I politely explained that kilts are not merely washed but dry cleaned and that I was more than capable of it myself. But she wouldn't be dissuaded; as soon as I turned my attention back to the bottles, her hand was suddenly on my bum.'

'Who can blame her? A very nice bum,' Callum teased, which earned him a playful slap on the arm from his boyfriend. 'We're at work, save the compliments for tonight. Anyway, I sent her away quite firmly and threatened to call the manager if she didn't leave me alone. Then she left. But on the way here I passed two girls who were giggling, blushing and I heard one of them say I was hot and goad her friend into flirting with me.'

'If they knew you were gay,' Callum remarked. 'All their dreams would be shattered ...'

'They're not interested in *me*, they think it's exotic to see a man in a kilt,' explained Andrew, annoyed.

'They just haven't got a clue,' said Amelia, shrugging her shoulders. 'My grandparents still don't believe me when I tell them that it's actually normal for men to wear kilts – *skirts* – here.'

'Speaking of which, didn't they want to come and visit some time?' asked Andrew.

Amelia laughed as if he'd made a good joke. 'They've been saying that for five years, it's never going to happen. They equate Scotland with Greenland and the Arctic – a distant, foreign, cold country that's better to stay away from. They are stuck with their Ruhrgebiet way of life.'

‘Never say never.’ Callum pushed his chair back. ‘So, back to work.’

Amelia and Andrew chatted for a while, then she also got up to relieve Shona in the shop. Alyson was standing at the second till, serving a plump woman with glasses who was looking round in all directions as she pushed the calendar with the kilt-wearing yoga Scotsmen across the counter.

‘I think that’s her husband,’ Alyson whispered to Amelia as she scanned a considerable amount of whisky miniatures. Amelia inconspicuously followed Alyson’s gaze to the pained-looking, elderly gentleman at the brochure table. Shrugging her shoulders, she turned back to her customer.

‘Quite busy today, isn’t it?’ he asked with a thick French accent.

‘Oh, it’s fine, we’ve had worse days,’ Amelia replied politely and began to wrap the small bottles in tissue paper.

‘Well, I’m sure you’re always happy when you can call it a day after a day like that, aren’t you?’ The Frenchman’s dark eyes twinkled conspiratorially.

‘Yes, well, I don’t really mind. But of course, it’s always nice to call it a day and get home to rest up,’ said Amelia, who missed the wink he gave her. Alyson glanced at her from the side, but she was busy with a new customer.

‘And what do you do after work?’ asked the Frenchman, who obviously couldn’t be put off.

Amelia shrugged her shoulders. ‘Going out, visiting my friends at the riding yard, reading ... whatever you do.’

‘I’m Mathieu, by the way,’ he introduced himself. ‘And you?’

Amelia pointed to her name tag. ‘Amelia.’

‘But that’s not a traditional Scottish name, is it?’, Mathieu remarked.

‘No, I’m from Germany.’ With that, she slid the last bottle into the bag. ‘That’s seventy-nine eighty-one please.’

Mathieu pulled out a credit card. ‘It would be nice to see you again.’

‘We’d love to have you back again,’ Amelia said politely, tearing the receipt from the card reader and putting it in the bag before handing it to Mathieu. ‘Enjoy the rest of your stay.’

‘My goodness, you really have no interest in men at all, do you? You wouldn’t even notice one flirting with you if he literally told you *I’m flirting*’ whispered Alyson, who currently had no customer.

Amelia shrugged her shoulders. ‘It took a while till I realised. But flirting at work ... No, thanks. I’d rather not. He wasn’t my type anyway.’

‘What’s your type?’ Alyson asked.

‘None at the moment,’ replied Amelia, smiling kindly at her next customer. ‘Being single is so much easier,’ she whispered as she bent down to pick up a small paper bag.

‘Rowan thought so too, until Tristan came along,’ said Alyson, who now had customers again.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, please follow me for the two o’clock tour,’ Camille’s voice rang out in her unmistakable French accent and the shop emptied as most of the people followed her out.

‘Honestly, all this flirting is overrated anyway,’ snorted Amelia. ‘Compliments, stupid chat-up lines ... Why don’t guys just go and say: *Hey, I don’t know your character because I’ve never met you before, but I like you. Do you want to go out and then go to bed with me?* Seriously, you can’t fall in love with someone you don’t already know well. My opinion. You can’t fall in love with someone you just met.’

‘Ah, I see,’ Alyson said, clearly amused.

‘You knew Jake before you went out, too,’ Amelia stated, as if in defence of herself.

‘Yep, and I hated him,’ Alyson reminded her, ‘I thought he was a cocky, arrogant prick with his brain down his trousers.’

Amelia laughed. ‘How wrong you can be.’

‘Well. Is there a man you know well and think is potential boyfriend material?’

‘No,’ Amelia said. ‘It doesn’t matter though, I’m very happy on my own.’

‘Of course, but maybe you’d be happier with ...?’

‘Just leave it,’ Amelia interrupted her.

‘All right,’ Alyson gave up with a shrug.

‘Since it’s not too busy at the moment, I’ll go and tidy up that mess by the scarves,’ said Amelia, pointing to the jumble of scarves that tourists had taken off the hangers and then carelessly dropped on a shelf.

She picked up the mess with a sigh. She had just hung the first two scarves neatly back over the hanger when a dark voice from behind asked: ‘Can I have that?’

Startled, Amelia flinched and then hastily turned round.

‘Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’ Amelia’s

gaze travelled up the casual shirt and to the light blue eyes of the person who had spooked her. His curly hair and short-trimmed beard were the colour of copper. She just stared at him for a moment.

‘Everything okay?’ he asked.

‘It ... yeah, sure,’ Amelia stammered, feeling a little foolish.

‘Can I have the scarf then, please?’ he asked. As he smiled, small wrinkles formed in the corners of his eyes.

‘Which one ... eh ...?’ Amelia hastily turned round again, knocking over one of the wooden candlesticks that stood on the shelf with a discount sign. ‘Oops,’ she said, putting it back up and then pointing to the still knotted scarves. ‘Which one do you want?’

‘The red one, please,’ said the man.

‘Sure.’ Amelia hurriedly tried to untangle it from the jumble, only making it worse. ‘Scheiße,’ she cursed quietly.

‘No rush, I’m not in a hurry,’ the man suddenly said in German with a strong English accent.

‘Wait, where ...?’ She spun round to face him again.

‘I have a friend in Stuttgart. The scarf is for her too, it’s her birthday in a fortnight. *Scheiße* was one of the first words she taught me.’ He grinned and bared a row of white teeth.

‘Oh,’ was all Amelia could think of saying. Then she remembered what she had just wanted to do. She turned her attention to the scarves, a little more slowly this time, and finally pulled out the red one. ‘Here.’ She held it out to him. Somewhat amused, he took the

scarf from her. ‘Dankeschön.’

‘No problem.’ She looked after him as he strolled towards the till. Alyson gave her a meaningful look over his shoulder. Amelia shook her head at herself. *What the hell was that?* she chided herself. Then she set about finally tidying up all the scarves.

Chapter 2: The new farrier



‘I thought you didn’t believe in love at first sight,’ Alyson laughed as Amelia joined her in the car. Her own was in the garage and so Alyson had offered to give her a lift.

‘I don’t,’ said Amelia, who felt strange at the memory of the red-haired man from earlier.

‘I can see that,’ Alyson said with a laugh. ‘So why do you look like a teenager with a crush for the first time?’

‘I don’t ...’

‘Yes, you do,’ Alyson interrupted and continued. ‘I mean, he was pretty hot.’

‘I didn’t even notice,’ Amelia lied, earning the next giggle from Alyson.

‘Of course not, because tall, red-haired Highlanders aren’t your type at all, are they?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Haha,’ said Alyson. ‘Can you pass me a chocolate

bar from the glovebox? I'm craving chocolate now.'

Amelia dug out two bars, handed one to her friend and then took a bite of the other while she looked out of the window at Loch Ness glistening in the sunlight. A horde of tourists stood at the side of the road, most likely taking photos of a tree trunk floating in the water.

Alyson shook her head in annoyance as she drove round the crowd. 'Always these tourists,' she muttered. 'Are you still coming to the stables or should I drop you off at home?'

'I'd love to come up with you, say Hi to everyone. Haven't seen them in a while.'

'Cool. So, back to your guy, who you don't fancy at all ... Did you at least ask him for his number?'

'No!' Amelia replied in a tone as if Alyson had lost her mind.

'Then how will you ever see him again?' she said regretfully.

'Not at all, of course. Can you just leave it at that?'

'That's all right.' Alyson shrugged her shoulders.

'Tell me, is Jake actually staying for longer?' Amelia changed the subject.

Alyson beamed. 'Yes. Believe it or not, he's applied to the theatre in Inverness. He could really see himself making fewer films, moving here and becoming a stage actor.'

'That's great,' Amelia said happily. 'Does he still live in the cottage on the farm?'

Alyson blushed. 'Well, officially, yes, but he always stays at my place.'

'Ooooooh,' Amelia said, wiggling her eyebrows.

‘Those are some hot nights in the Highlands in summer.’

‘Very funny,’ said Alyson, blushing even more. Then she turned up the radio. As usual, she had an ABBA CD in the player. Laughing, Amelia rolled down the window and the two of them started singing loudly: *Gimme Gimme Gimme a man after midnight*, which earned them a few irritated looks from a hiking group they were passing.

The wind ruffled Amelia’s hair as she leant her head out a little. She loved this country, the people she had found here ... she couldn’t imagine ever going back to Germany. She missed her family, but here she had found friends who were like family to her. Alyson and Jake, Rowan and Tristan, who owned the small riding stables in Cawdor, but also some of the other colleagues from Urquhart Castle, many of whom were just as interested in history as she was.

The traffic in Inverness was awful due to the many tourists and Amelia was glad when Alyson’s car turned off onto the country road that led towards Cawdor. There were a lot more people on the road than at any other time of year, but the caravan with the Dutch licence plate in front of them pulled over so that Alyson could overtake, and eventually she turned into the driveway to the horse yard.

In the grooming area stood Arwen, Tristan’s black mare, and Silvano, Rowan’s grey pony. The latter neighed happily as Alyson and Amelia got out of the car; he was an attentive, friendly animal who loved anyone who paid attention to him – and occasionally slipped him a treat.

‘Hey,’ greeted Rowan, who had just come out of the stable with the little rescue Welsh pony Kili, who she then tied up next to Silvano. ‘How are you doing? Nice to see you again, Amelia.’

‘Good, quite stressful at work, but you know how it is. Why are you all getting your horses out?’ Alyson pointed to Fili, the other Welsh pony that Tristan was leading out by the halter.

‘Duncan will be here soon,’ he replied before greeting the girls.

‘Oh, I forgot all about that.’ Alyson touched her forehead. ‘Well, we’ve arrived just in time I suppose.’

‘Take it easy, he can’t do all their hooves at the same time anyway,’ Rowan said. ‘Tam and Simon are still riding. Their ponies are also due, and Catriona isn’t here yet either.’

‘I’ll go and get Hamlet anyway,’ said Alyson and disappeared into the stable.

‘Would you like to give us a hand with the grooming?’ Rowan turned to Amelia.

‘Sure,’ she nodded and reached into the grooming box next to the stable wall. While she began to groom Kili’s black coat, Rowan talked about her honeymoon. Her eyes lit up and her hand kept resting on her still rather flat stomach. She had only told Tristan that she was pregnant on the last day of their journey, on the tip of the *Pap of Glencoe*. He had wanted to strangle her for climbing a mountain in her condition, and Rowan laughed when Tristan said with mock seriousness that he still hadn’t forgiven her for it. Seeing the two of them together like this, it was hard to imagine that they had only met two years ago; it seemed as if

they had known each other for a lifetime. Amelia was seized by a sudden feeling of longing to feel such a bond with someone. She involuntarily thought back to the red-haired man from this afternoon.

‘Well, what – or rather, *who* – are you dreaming about?’ Alyson snapped her out of her thoughts.

‘What? Oh, nothing,’ Amelia waved her off.

‘Sure, that’s why you were staring longingly into the distance,’ giggled her friend. She tied her chubby, brown pony to the last free pole in the grooming area.

‘I just remembered something,’ Amelia waved it off and suddenly looked very focussed at a spot on Kili’s shoulder.

‘I see,’ Alyson grinned.

‘Did we miss something?’ Rowan put her hands on her hips and looked from one to the other.

‘No, Alyson just thinks I need a man,’ Amelia said casually.

‘Not just any man. But earlier ... oh, let’s not go there.’

‘Al?’ Rowan had become curious.

‘There was some bloke at the castle, but I’ll never see him again anyway.’ Amelia shook her head. ‘It doesn’t matter now.’

‘Never say never,’ Tristan interjected. ‘Sometimes fate has its own plans.’

‘Here, give me a hand with Arwen’s eye ointment, wise man,’ Rowan instructed him.

There was a rumble behind them and when Amelia turned round, she saw Duncan the farrier’s old, rickety van pull into the courtyard. He waved cheerfully and parked against the side of the house. From the