



# LOVE NOT FORGOTTEN

By

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My love, as always, to the Celt in my life: Stuart.

## PROLOGUE

*1602**Scotland*

When he first spotted a clump of dark tartan in the heather, Dougal MacTamhais was certain a soul had come to harm. But upon investigation he found a sleeping young woman, basket of wild berries by her side, who screamed in mortal fear when she woke at the heavy snorting of the approaching horse. He was after all a MacTamhais and she a MacDaniells, clans denoted by the tartans worn with immense pride, and a history of ill feelings and curt words had drawn many a sword between the two.

Katrina hugged her waist and trembled, realizing much too late that she had wandered too far from the protection of her clan and was vulnerable to the huge man who peered down at her.

“Are ye hurt?” he had asked, kneeling beside her shivering form.

A waterfall of thick auburn curls framed pale cheeks and huge hazel eyes, which bore into him, as though she was uncertain as to his motive for dismounting his horse and drawing so close. Her hair fluttered over delicate shoulders as she shook her head. “Nay.” She reached for her basket, holding it against her chest as though a shield, and inched away. “I am of sound mind and body,” she said defiantly.

“Aye,” he smiled. “I can see that, and much more.”

Her suspicion faded as he sat quietly at a respectable distance and softly spoke with her. The quarrels of their families meant nothing that day as the sun slowly pressed across the sky, and by the time the shadows began to fall Dougal had fallen deeply in love with a carefree maiden with a single mind dictated by an independent heart, which soon melted to his. She accepted his offer to ride with him to her village, dropping her safely out of sight of MacDaniells men who would not share such tender emotions. Theirs had become a forbidden love.

When Dougal became chief and was bound by duty to marry another for the sake of the union of clans, Katrina waited. Deep in her heart, she knew that she was one day meant to be with him. “Our love will find its way,” she told him. “One day fate will see to it that our hearts are joined.”

His first wife, God rest her soul, died in the attempt to bear him a child. Anne Campbell had been a good wife, and despite the politics behind the marriage, Dougal had been very fond of her and honored their union with the respect the clans demanded. But she was thin boned and frail of body, and the strain of pregnancy had taken its toll. He buried her and their stillborn daughter together and mourned the loss of her loyalty and bravery and goodness.

Then he sought out the woman whom he had loved, truly loved, ever since stumbling across her accidentally one summer morning on the moors.

\* \* \* \*

Katrina MacDaniells accepted Dougal’s proposal to elope with him, ignoring the

dishonor to her father and brother. The night she agreed to meet Dougal she took her sister aside and explained in detail why she had to betray her family name. After a flood of tears, the two sisters embraced and said their good-byes. Katrina stole into the darkness to meet the only man who held her heart--the tall, dark, warrior chief named Dougal MacTamhais.

They married the next day and for the following week Dougal set aside his duties as chief, relinquishing them temporarily to his brother Malcolm. And then he spent every glorious minute holding her body, kissing her hair, making love to her and when sleep overpowered him he made certain that she was in his arms so that when he woke he could smell her, touch her, taste her. If there were a heaven on earth, Dougal mused, he had truly discovered its riches. And with every passing day his passion for her grew.

\* \* \* \*

Married in secret a few short months ago, Dougal had never been happier.

Before the birds began their morning songs, before the sun broke over the heather shrouded horizon, before the mist even considered lifting its heavy weight from the moors, Dougal MacTamhais was awake. Soundlessly, he crept to the window and opened its shutters, a true believer that fresh air and sunlight was nature's gift for health regardless of the early winter chill. Then he slid back under the covers to wait for his true love to shake the dying remnants of sleep from her dreaming mind.

Dougal lay beside her, waiting for those once frightened eyes to open, to turn to him and sparkle. He could not begin his day without seeing them.

Delicate eyelashes fluttered as he stroked a curled strand of hair from her cheek.

Patience was not his virtue. His hand drifted under the quilts to find the hardened curves of her breast and she twisted at his gentle touch, as he knew that she would. His breath grew heavy, his heart pounded from passion, but before opening her lids she grasped his wrist as tightly as her strength allowed and sighed, "Dougal, no. Think of the bairn."

As her pregnancy progressed their intimacy slowed. Her feminine instinct warded him off as she concentrated on producing a healthy heir. "This boy," she said, "will one day become an honored and gifted warrior, one the people will remember in songs and poems. He will heal the hurts between the clan MacTamhais and the clan MacDaniells. Because of this child," she said, guiding Dougal's palm over the mound in her belly, "there will be peace in the hearts of our kinsmen."

"Surely a wee kiss wouldna hurt the progression of peace," he teased, flexing his muscled arm around her breasts, holding her tightly against his barrel chest.

"Nay," she laughed, pushing back a long lock of tangled black hair from his cheek. "A wee kiss wouldna hurt."

Dougal's fingers inched firmly up her backbone and neck and under her heavy auburn hair. Pulling her chin towards his mouth he whispered, "Have I told ye how much I love ye?"

"Not since last night." Her eyes sparkled as she cupped his whiskered cheeks in her palms.

"I love ye, Katrina," he purred, and touched her lips with the tip of his forefinger, running it tenderly over its delicate softness. "I love ye so much." Engulfing the softness with his tongue she gasped in turn and dug her slender fingers into the expanse of muscle across his powerful shoulders. He sensed her mixture of want and caution and was not

offended when she pushed his advance compassionately aside. Kissing her and holding her would keep him content for now.

"What are yer plans for the day?" she asked, burrowing beneath the quilt's warmth.

"Malcolm sent word last night he wants to see me." Dougal had already tucked long shirttails into his kilt and was tying his hair behind his head with a thick leather strap.

"Yer brother concerns himself too much with politics."

"Aye, he does. But I value his good sense. I have no doubt something is troubling him."

"Will he no come here?"

Dougal shook his head and perched on the edge of their bed. "His knee is still sore from the fall so I am to go to him."

Katrina gripped his arm in alarm. "I dinna want to be alone." She sat up. "Let me go with ye."

"Ye will no be alone. Besides, ye're in no condition to go galloping across the moors. I will be back before ye know I have even been away." His words comforted her only slightly. There was fear in her eyes, the same fear he had seen on that summer day so long ago when they first met. Hugging her close he whispered, "What's wrong? Why do ye tremble so?"

"I dinna know. I have a feeling. Dougal, please. Send word to Malcolm ye canna go and stay with me. Please."

"Ye have nothing to worry about, sweet lass. Joseph and Duncan are here. They'll protect ye with their lives if there's danger, which there will no be, I promise."

"Still, I'm frightened."

Dougal kissed her forehead and smiled. Her being with child had made her nerves shaky, her anxieties more acute. And he understood what was beneath it all. "Katrina," he soothed, "We have been husband and wife for some time now. Do ye no think your brother has finally accepted our union?"

A tear trickled down her flushed cheek. "Ye know Bruce hasna love for a MacTamhais, unless his sword is streaked scarlet."

He knew her words rang true but felt their lives had become too secure to worry. Their home was solid, isolated and protected. Dougal believed that here they would be safe. Time and a heart swollen with love had gripped his mind with complacency. Perhaps this was the reason he leaned so heavily on Malcolm's advice. "I will be back soon."

One last kiss and Dougal MacTamhais was gone.

A chill in the wind forced Dougal to wrap a flash of red tartan tightly around his shoulders. Clouds had moved in quickly from the angry sea as they often did this time of year. Before he reached his brother's home there were flakes of snow in the air.

Dismounting from his horse, Dougal was greeted by his brother with odd surprise. "To what do I owe the pleasure on this cold morning?" Malcolm said, stroking the horse's glistening snout with one hand while holding the harness with the other.

Dougal froze. A bolt of white light flashed from his heart to his mind; he had been tricked, lured away from his home with a sense of duty to his kinsmen, the only other emotion as powerful as his love for his Katrina. Katrina! She had begged him not

to go, that she had 'a feeling', and he had brushed her fear aside as though she were a silly girl. But she had been right, again.

Without uttering a word to his brother, Dougal was back on his horse, white knuckles grabbing the reins, stalwart thighs squeezing the saddle and mighty heels jabbing the terrified animal's sides. He had no thought other than Katrina, his dry lips silently praying that the message was merely a misunderstanding and not the decoy he knew it to be.

Snow and freezing rain stung into his flesh as his steed tore down the familiar path and the whiff of smoke confirmed his dread that evil awaited his return. Dougal drew his sword, concentrating on the rising panic, funneling the wrenching sensation into his shoulder and arm as he gripped the weapon tighter. "Katrina," he called in the wind. "Dear God, keep her safe!"

A cloud of blue and black smoke bellowed over the trees. Voices rose--shouting, arguing, cursing. Dougal jabbed his heels frantically into the horse's flesh, its foam spraying into his face as the creature tore steadily onwards, the image of his burning house drawing closer and larger. He was off the horse before it had slowed and racing on steel legs through the open door. Dougal lifted his arm to shield his face from the searing heat. Dry timbers popped and crackled all around him. Duncan's bloodied body laid sprawled across the floor, the brave gaze now oblivious to failure. His sword lay unstained by his side.

"Katrina," Dougal hollered, but there was no answer. He dashed up the oak stairway to their bedroom. Smoke stung his eyes to water and he fought the urge to cough for fear his lack of breath would prevent him rescuing her. "Katrina," he called again, but the unmade bed was empty.

Leaning from the window to gulp fresh air, he caught movement from the courtyard beneath. Focusing through the drifting blue haze that belched from below, he saw her being briskly carried, her tiny fists flailing her brother's shoulders. Three of the MacDaniells' kinsmen were with him, all preparing to mount their horses to escape since their human booty had been captured.

Dougal flew down the steps, panic having subsided to sheer anger. A shattering pop over his head caused him to hesitate for a moment and within the moment a flaming beam collapsed and grazed his right shoulder, knocking him sideways into the floor. Struggling to his feet amidst a shower of sparks, Dougal ignored the stinging raw nerves and the smell of his own burnt flesh and hair. Shaking the confusion from his senses, his sword still firmly within his grip, he worked his way through the thickening smoke to the door from which he burst, screaming a curse on the name of Bruce MacDaniells. Katrina's expression was a mixture of relief and dread as her brother hoisted her to waiting arms already on horseback. Then Bruce turned, drew his sword and paced towards Dougal who had crossed the courtyard uttering curses in Gaelic.

"Leave her!" Dougal ordered, his teeth clenched. "She is a MacTamhais now and will be forevermore." The sword glistened in the swirling snow.

"Over my dead body she will," Bruce growled in return. "Ye had no right stealing her from us like the cowardly thief in the night that ye are. I have come to take her back where she belongs, away from yer poisonous lot."

"Coward, am I?" Dougal sneered. "Stole her away, did I? And I suppose it was yer bravery that tricked me into being away to make yer task easier?"

"I'll fight ye if that's what ye want, MacTamhais." Bruce hardened his stance only feet away. "Make me a happy man to see yer blood stain the snow."

Katrina cried out, wiggling in vain within the grasp of the powerfully built man who held her captive. "Nay, Bruce, I beg of ye, don't do this! Please!" But neither acknowledged her. Their eyes were locked on each other, circling, and waiting, swords held ready for one to make the first move.

The burn on Dougal's shoulder had weakened him more than he suspected. His weapon felt heavy and pain slashed from his neck to his shoulder blade, but he gnashed his teeth in defiance, praying his enemy would not detect the weakness. But Bruce was no fool.

"Dougal," he smirked after a quick glance at the charred cloth and smoldering wound. "I do believe ye're at a wee bit of disadvantage." And seizing the moment he lunged.

Dougal felt the air slice under his chin yet was quick enough to avoid the blade. "Don't underestimate the power of rage," he snapped in return, his own lunge missing its target by merely a breath.

"For ye, or against ye?" And within a flash Dougal's wound was ripped open, a spasm seized his shoulder and he spun in an effort to quell the agony while valiantly attacking his opponent at the same time.

Bruce obviously hadn't expected Dougal to recover so quickly from such a venomous blow. His eyes widened and shoulders relaxed and within that second Dougal thrust his sword, catching the MacDaniells' tunic and tearing it. Crimson seeped from the material and the smirk on Bruce's face eased. But Dougal had not put enough strength into the thrust. Perhaps if he hadn't been slowed by the burn, if his ears hadn't been filled with the sound of Katrina's pleas to stop, if the snow hadn't swirled in his face, Bruce would have been sinking to his knees awaiting the dark cloak of death to veil his vision. Instead the cut was only deep enough to infuriate him, and as Dougal struggled with weakening muscles, Bruce seized his chance and ripped his sword across the clan chief's stomach.

For a few brief seconds Dougal felt nothing except a gush of heat as blood poured from the shredded flesh. Katrina's anguished wail seemed distant now, even though his dimming eyes told him she hadn't been allowed to move from the grim spectator on horseback nearby. He dropped his sword as his legs buckled, throwing his bulk onto his bended knees into the wet, cold earth. Stunned and paralyzed with piercing pain, Dougal knew without looking that his wound was mortal, and he was soon to die. Despite the menacing figure of Bruce MacDaniells grinning in victory over him, Dougal focused on his beloved Katrina. If his lids were to close from this world, it was the vision of her beauty he wanted to take with him into eternity.

The sharp edge of a sword snapped his attention to the glowering expression of his executioner. "Any last words, MacTamhais?" a raucous voice asked.

"Death will no keep me from loving her, or she me," Dougal rasped, aware his lungs were draining not only air, but blood. "May ye and yer kin ne'er find peace until my soul unites with hers."

Bruce laughed, dry and cracked, "For a dying man ye are truly poetic, but the likes of ye has no power o'er me and mine." His mouth curled into a devilish grin. "Rest well amidst the flames, MacTamhais. Those of yer clan gone before ye await their



chief.”

Dougal’s body had numbed, so when the blade sliced into his throat and twisted with a horrid wrench, he heard the crunch but felt little pain. Breath impossible now, he found Katrina with his fading eyes, pleading forgiveness for leaving her that morning against her wishes. With what little air left in his lungs he whispered, “I love ye, Katrina. Death will not ... keep me ... from finding ye ... again.”

His last vision was her tearstained face. The last sound was her wail of mourning. The sweet earth filled his nose and mouth and mixed with the warm flow of his blood in the snow.

## Chapter One

Kate Daniels held the buzzing phone. Like stubbing a toe and knowing that within the next few seconds the pain would register in her brain, she waited. Sure enough, by the time she slumped onto the kitchen chair, her chest heaved with sobs of abandonment and betrayal. Her fiancé of three months was leaving, not only her but the country. Kate felt as though her chest had been torn open.

Again.

As the yawning hole of self-pity opened, she remembered the first time her heart had been mercilessly trodden on, after six years of unfailing loyalty to her high school sweetheart, Frank Taylor. He had gone off to university to study economics and she to community college to study interior design, and with every phone call and letter he promised to be faithful and true, as did she. She had no reason to doubt him until after his graduation he came home long enough to tell her his life was mysteriously incomplete, something of 'essence' was missing, and he was going to backpack through Europe to 'find' himself. Kate later discovered he was not only finding himself but a voluptuous blonde classmate he had been keeping a secret for over a year. They were going on his voyage of self discovery together. Anger and frustration kept Kate from dating for almost two years until at a summer barbeque she met Dr. Antonio Beretta and was swept off what she had thought were firmly grounded feet.

Tony was the complete opposite of Frank. He was tall and dark, with glistening black hair that curled over his collar, where Frank had been not-so-tall, fair and pasty. Tony's smile was a perfect flash of white teeth, his wit infectious, while Frank's thin lips were often curled in snide comments that he and he alone thought hilariously entertaining. Tony enjoyed movies and dancing and house parties while Frank's greatest social ambition was to slump on the couch, can of beer in one hand, the remote in the other. More than once Kate had wondered what she had ever seen in Frank, except that he had been her first love and first loves have no references to draw upon.

Now she had too much reference. Tony had accepted a job transfer and left, suddenly and without apology. End of story.

Tall, short, blonde, dark, dancing or leaving--she wasn't going to trust any man ever again. At thirty years of age she made a vow of spinsterhood. Anything was better than this heartache.

So why was she still gripping the phone?

"Honestly," she whispered to a thin streak of summer sunlight on the table. "When will you ever learn?" Kate put the phone down, snatched a tissue from the flowered box near by and succumbed to the emptiness of dismissal. When the sobbing subsided, she ground the palms of her hands into her lap and said aloud, "Pity-party over, girl. Steady up and think of the future."

There was always work to fall back on. Part-time decorating consultant with a department store was not the glamour job she envisioned when she studied the art of interior design. However, she found comfort in her flare for textiles, lighting, fabrics,

space and coloring. As word about her talent spread, Kate managed to build her own clientele with pride and satisfaction. At least something in her life gave her satisfaction. Once this horrible afternoon came to a close, she'd throw herself into the loving arms of her work.

In the immediate future she would have to explain swollen red eyes to her sister Mally, who was bounding up the walk, mail in hand.

Ironically, Kate mused, how she had been thinking about opposites, and here was Mally. One year younger, she looked the spitting image of mother--straight blonde hair, wicked blue eyes, creamy complexion--and had childlike curiosity, good humor and a strong sense of fair play. Next to her, Kate's dark complexion seemed overdone, her hazel eyes small, her brown hair frizzy. Just like her father, she shied away from being the center of attention, introverted and philosophical. Strange what games genetics could play with two siblings.

"Hey, sis," Mally called, letting the screen door slam behind her. She casually threw the letters on the table and was halfway to the kettle when she stopped and peered into Kate's flushed face. "Oh-oh. What happened?"

"Nothing that I shouldn't have seen coming."

Mally hovered, shrugged, and reached for the box of tea. "He wasn't right for you anyway," she said. Without further comment, she made them tea while Kate composed her tender emotions, more easily done with company, unsympathetic as it was. Straddling the chair, Mally sat down with steaming cups for both of them. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

"Not really. Except he's taken another job."

"The suggestion you accompany him never came up then?"

"Yes, but..." Kate twisted her cup unceremoniously, hoping her sister would not pick up on the lie and change the subject.

Mally was shrewd. Her professional background as a budding social psychologist demanded it. "Okay," she said in what sounded like the beginning of one of her lectures at the university. "To start, there's earth beyond the borders of this one-horse town, and people inhabit that earth." She grinned. "Granted, many of the male inhabitants are knuckle grazers, but nonetheless, there are wonders to behold." She leaned forward. "And you, big sister, aren't getting any younger."

"Thanks for reminding me. So what are you suggesting I do, professor, run aimlessly from one end of the continent to the other, begging for a man to come into my life? Don't think so."

"No," Mally smiled. "But there's more to life than sitting here watching the tide come in, waiting for Mr. Perfect to drop into your lap."

"No such creature." Kate thought of Tony. He had come close but now the illusion was thoroughly shattered. She sipped the tea and thumbed through the mail. "Bills," she sighed. "Now there's something a girl can always depend on."

"That's not a bill," Mally said, pointing to the oblong airmail envelope. "The stamp looks British. Do you have a secret pen pal you haven't told me about?"

Kate turned the envelope over, examining every marking. "That's odd," she said. "I don't know anyone from Britain."

"Obviously someone knows you. Are you going to open it or do I die of old age waiting?"

Parchment-like paper was neatly folded twice, the creases razor sharp. "It's from a solicitor: 'The Office of Mackenzie and MacRae, Glasgow, Scotland.'"

"Go on. I'm dying of suspense here."

"Well, it says that you and I have been left property. We're co-inheritors with a Mr. Alexander MacTavish of a twenty acre estate in Gillewne, Scotland, left to us by a gentleman by the name of James Stewart Campbell." Kate glanced over the top of the parchment, brow furrowed with the confusion reflected in Mally's face. "Who is James Stewart Campbell?"

"Better yet," Mally smirked, "who is Alexander MacTavish?"

"There must be some mistake." Kate flipped the envelope over. Her name, her address, but....

"What else does it say?"

"That we are to notify the above office at our earliest convenience as to our intentions. Apparently this MacTavish fellow has offered to buy our share of the property." Kate leaned back and brushed her fingers through her hair. "Probably some crusty old Scotsman with a sack full of money."

"All the better for us, then." Mally reached for the letter, poring meticulously over every word. "There's no explanation as to why we're in the will. I've never been to Scotland, and I know for a fact you haven't." She over emphasized 'you' with a stinging sharpness. "Maybe it's a mistake," she continued, oblivious to Kate's annoyance. "Wait a minute. Dad was in Scotland during the war. Didn't he have a good friend by the name of Campbell?"

Kate glanced into her living room. On the mantel was an old photograph of their father in his uniform that she had affectionately reframed after he died sixteen months ago. A wash of guilt fluttered through her wounded heart. Whenever he started telling stories of the war years she would glaze over and nod politely, but she had never really listened with the respect owed to his service. Now the stories were silenced forever, his memories died with him, and all she had were a handful of photographs, his medals and a shoebox with a few bits and pieces of his once treasured memorabilia. "Yes." Kate sighed reverently. "If I remember correctly they were guards together at Balmoral Castle. Dad said they had been chosen because they were so tall."

Funny, her remembering that story so clearly.

"That's it then," Mally squeaked. "This could be the next best thing to having a rich uncle." Her eyebrows wiggled like skinny blonde caterpillars.

"I'll write to this lawyer and ask him to proceed with the sale and we'll split the money." It seemed the logical solution, the well-trodden path of least resistance.

"You'll do no such thing. We'll go and sort it out in person. This could be just what you need, a holiday in the Highlands of Scotland! To say nothing of the fact we might be unbelievably rich."

Kate pressed her lips together and gave Mally a disapproving glare. "Rich? Yeah, right. Let me remind you that 'rich' and 'Daniels' are two words that never appear in the same sentence. And I don't *need* a holiday. What I need is some peace and quiet."

Mally shook her head determinedly. "Not this time." It sounded very much a threat. "Before you sit there and think of a thousand excuses not to go, I'll make a decision, right here and now. We're going. Full stop."

Kate's stomach somersaulted. "But...." She would have to ask a neighbor to

keep an eye on the house, water the plants, pick up her mail, and it was too much to ask. Besides, her passport was likely outdated or declared null and void through lack of use. And what about work? What if she lost her job?

“Stop thinking,” Mally scolded. “You’re running every excuse not to go through your mind, aren’t you? Well, knock it off.” She picked up the phone. “Call this solicitor and tell him we’re on our way.”

A thrill of adventure rippled through Kate’s body. Her palms sweating, she took the phone and felt her sister’s approving stare as she pressed the numbers to call Glasgow, Scotland. Trying to swallow as she listened to dual rings, her voice caught when someone with a delightful accent politely answered the call. “Yes,” she heard herself say, as though wandering aimlessly through a dream. “My name is Katherine Daniels and I need to talk to a Mr. Mackenzie about property left to my sister and me in a will....”

And despite her original reluctance, Kate had the most delicious feeling that something special had just dropped in her lap.

## Chapter Two

Kate's nerves kept her from sleeping on the night flight to Glasgow. She pressed her forehead against the cool oval glass of the plane and watched the North Star slowly fade, as the horizon between the blue earth and the vast blackness of space grew lighter with the approaching day. When the clouds temporarily parted she could see the patchwork quilt of countryside--fields divided by miles of stone fences and scattered with miniature villages surrounding churches. This was her first glimpse of Scotland before the clouds reclaimed the scene. Fatigue was soon replaced with the erratic tickle of butterflies spiraling out of control in her stomach.

"Mally, wake up." She nudged the slumped form curled precariously on the seat beside her. "We're almost there."

Half-opened lids fluttered towards the window. "Is it raining?"

"How should I know? And what difference does it make?"

"I heard it always rained in Scotland." She was rubbing circulation into her cheeks and yawning. A blob of smudged mascara under one eye resembled a panda. "And seeing that I'll be driving, the challenge of maneuvering on the wrong side of the road with you reading a map will be bad enough without pouring rain to contend with."

"I admire your bravery," Kate confessed humbly, wiping away the smudge from her sister's cheek. "I would never have done this without you."

"Well, I'm killing two birds with this stone." She reached under the seat for her carry-on bag and pulled out a notebook scribbled in what looked like hieroglyphics. "I've been given the name of a renowned parapsychologist at the University of Edinburgh that I want to talk to." She scratched through her notes. "Dr. Timothy Younger. Apparently, he's a real life ghost-buster. In one of his recent articles he stated that there were more supernatural sightings in Britain than anywhere else in the world. Cool, eh?"

"Um." Kate was too tired to get into a conversation about apparitions despite the enthusiasm beaming from Mally's wide-awake expression. Ever since supposedly witnessing a member of the spirit world float down a stairway at a friend's house as a child, Mally firmly believed in the existence of trapped souls searching for absolution. And despite poring over material written in the name of parapsychology, it was a field snubbed by most in the scientific field as superstitious nonsense. If this university took the topic seriously, Kate thought, then Mally had found her Nirvana.

Regardless, she wanted no part in it. Ghost busters indeed and a doctorate, no less. What next? She watched the clouds begin to thin again.

"Do you suppose our new home is haunted?" Mally asked, fixing on the opening landscape below.

"That's not even vaguely funny."

"Wasn't meant to be." But the corner of Mally's mouth twisted to keep from grinning.

"We'll have to ask old Mr. MacTavish, shall we?" Kate answered. "And charge

extra for each apparition that has the presence of mind to make an appearance.”

“Yes,” Mally said, laughing under her breath. “That’s just what we’ll do.”

\* \* \* \*

Gathering the luggage and going through customs was not difficult. Securing the rental car was. The paperwork seemed to take forever, and Kate had to lean over the counter to hear the soft voice of the attendant. Finally, after having the Scottish lilt repeat everything at least twice, Kate handed the keys to Mally. “As far as I could interpret, it’s the red Ford, just outside.”

It was. And standing nearby with a huge, toothless grin was a scrawny old man. What he lacked in appearance he more than made up for in congeniality. He took their luggage and stowed all of it into an impossibly small space in the trunk while continually apologizing about the rain as though he were solely responsible for the dreadful weather conditions. Or, at least, that’s what Kate thought he was saying. She picked a recognizable word out here and there and strung them together for a general theme. As long as he kept muttering without making eye contact she could smile politely and nod as though understanding him completely.

“Whoo’s drivin’ is wee fordie?” he said, stopping suddenly with a look of expectancy on his rugged face. “An ai’ll give ye a lesson on ow it’s doon.”

Mally’s approach to the driver’s seat answered his question and he enthusiastically went through the basics of driving a standard as though she had no idea how it was ‘doon’. Mally watched as he flicked every switch and continued sputtering what Kate had now decided was a totally foreign language.

“How long will it take us to get to Gillewne?” Mally asked, showing him the map.

The answer sounded like the grinding gears of an abused Volkswagen. Somewhere in the phlegm Kate was certain she heard the number four.

“Great.” Mally continued, “And how do I get out of here?”

After a great deal of hand waving and finger pointing at the roundabout and a litany of, “Ye dinna wanna take tha’ un, and ye dinna wanna take tha’ un, but ye doo wanna take ’is un.”

Mally glanced from the map to the roundabout. She pointed vaguely to one side. “Why don’t I take that one?” she asked innocently, mentally calculating directions.

“Why?” The old man stiffened between shock and amazement. “Why?” The word came out again loud and clear. “Och, lassie, because tha’s the way to England, and ye dinna wanna go there.” He continued to shake his head as he wondered off, mumbling. “Dinna wanna go there.”

“Did you really get all that?” Kate asked, pulling the seat belt across her shoulder.

“You must be joking,” Mally grinned. “But I’m getting out of here before he comes back.” Mally screeched the gears and jolted the ‘wee fordie’ towards the roundabout. “Even the car speaks Scottish,” she laughed, and the two girls giggled uncontrollably from fatigue mixed with the thrill of adventure, and they proceeded onto the road that would take them farther from the perplexing place called England.

With no wind the silver streaks of rain fell straight from the lowered heavens. The countryside, if it existed at all, was shrouded by a pea-soup fog that clung to every building and tree and stone fence. The pavement seemed to narrow the farther north they went, and Kate jumped more than once when another car suddenly bolted from around the corner on the ‘wrong side’ of the road. Normally she would mutter a curse at such a

shock, but Mally was concentrating so deeply on maneuvering the glistening road that Kate didn't want to interrupt. Opposites again. Why was she always trying to adapt to opposites?

Finally, Mally whirled the car onto a flat piece of pavement and turned off the engine. She rubbed her forehead and took several deep breaths. "What time is it?"

"Local? Or do you mean our time?" Kate glanced at her watch. Her eyes were too tired to focus on the numbers. "Maybe it's better we don't know. Are you okay to drive?"

"Yeah," Mally chirped. "I just needed to stop for a moment and relax. Shame though, that it's not sunny. I bet the landscape beyond this cursed fog is gorgeous."

"Can't rain forever." They fell silent awhile, watching the ghostly white form of a sheep graze carelessly past the front of the car.

"Funny, isn't it, our concept of time," Mally said in a far-off voice.

Kate slumped. *Oh no. Just wait*, she thought.

"Here we are, two strangers in a foreign land, surrounded by an impenetrable fog, not really knowing where we are, or when we are...." The sheep looked up as though listening but soon lost interest and vanished into a fold of cloud. "Maybe that sheep stepped back into its own time rather than the fog. Then again, maybe it doesn't exist at all when there's no one to see it."

"I thought you were a psychologist, not a philosopher."

"Um." Mally's trance continued until Kate flipped the paper of the map, making more of a scratching sound than necessary, hoping to draw her sister out of deep and ridiculous thoughts.

"We're here." Kate pointed to a dot almost hidden by a crease. "And we need to be here." She slid her finger up the paper an inch, holding it till she was certain Mally saw it clearly.

The car shuddered as the engine choked to life, swearing again in the native dialect. Mally ripped it into gear. "Right then. Seeing that there's only one road we don't have to be over-concerned about getting lost. So, off we go."

\* \* \* \*

The village of Gillewne was everything Kate had expected of a British country village. Stone cottages leaned towards each other as though whispering secrets that would take centuries to tell. Cobbled sidewalks and streets were worn with many a toe from a busy pedestrian caring for the day's duties. The stone church, the center of moral life, stood majestically in the center of the village, overlooking the green, an open oasis of space and benches and flowers, and no doubt on a sunny day a place of sports or picnicking. A stream bursting with clear rushing water from the rain drenched moors wound its path between stone blockades, eventually finding escape to the sea, which lay hidden in the mist on the other side of the highway. The discordant clank of the church bell fell on no ear; the village seemed deserted.

"Time stands still here, doesn't it?" Mally said, breaking the silence within the car. "Oh, look." She pointed to a pub positioned a stone's throw from the church. "Shall we stop for a drink?"

"The last thing on my mind is alcohol." Kate would have killed for a hot soapy bath and then a pillow and a chance to rest every aching muscle. Her mind was almost paralyzed with fatigue. "No, we'll visit the village later, when we're feeling better."



“Just checking.”

The pub sign waved slightly in a fleeting breeze as they inched slowly past: the Boar’s Head, a picture of just that, an ugly wild pig, evil yellow eyes between curled tusks, challenging any soul who dared step beneath. Despite the malevolent painting on the outside, Kate had an overwhelming suspicion that there was an abundance of warmth and camaraderie on the inside. In fact, she felt strongly as if she had been in that very building before, holding chilled hands to the warming fire, but as the pub and the boar’s head disappeared, the feeling vanished as well. *I’m more tired than I thought.* She chuckled dismissively.

And within minutes they were inching up the semicircular driveway of Kirkland Hall.

Ancient oaks stood guard along the drive, their massive trunks a polite distance from the next, yet close enough for the leaves to courtesy as the breeze saw suitable. A wave of manicured green lawn formed a sea beneath, the recent rains having deepened the color with dark pools of lushness. And the two story house loomed up in front of them, a testament to centuries of pride, splendor, and glory in its fortitude. The straight white walls breathed pride that her families had lived nobly within, and at the same time the walls choked back a quiet sorrow that the last master was gone and the future was uncertain.

The car crawled to a halt, egg-sized stones crunching under the wheels. Kate stared at the front, sweeping her unblinking eyes back and forth, up and down, mouth ajar, unable to utter even one syllable. Mally did the same, the intermittent swipe of the windshield wiper the only motion. The rain had stopped but the mist was as heavy as a steady downpour.

“We’re rich,” Mally mumbled, finally wrenching her gaze from the building to Kate. “Did you have any idea what this place was like?”

Kate shook her head numbly, turning slowly to meet her sister’s shocked and pale expression. “Not a clue,” she whispered, and turned to stare at the house again.

Minutes ticked by.

“Katie. Do you have the key?”

“No.”

There was another pensive pause.

“Katie. How are we going to get inside?”

“Mr. MacTavish is supposed to meet us. Apparently he lives over there.” She pointed to what at one time must have been the sleeping quarters for many a gallant steed. “Either he enjoys living in a hay stack or it’s been refurnished.” Kate swung open the door and leapt out, despite the protest of every screaming muscle. “I expect the latter. You go check the front door while I see if the old boy is in.”

Pulling her jacket over her head to keep the damp away was futile. It seeped into her skin and hair, exposed or not, and by the time she made it across the courtyard to the glistening door of the stables she felt a shiver run down her spine. “You better be in,” she grumbled, raising her knuckles to rap on the door.

Nothing. She tried again. Still nothing. Hugging her waist she turned to see Mally, shrugging her shoulders on the front step. Obviously the place was locked solid and tight.

“This is just great.” Kate stomped back across the yard, kicking gravel as she

went.

“Guess we should have stayed at the pub,” Mally joked. “At least we’d be dry. And happy.”

Kate cupped her palms around her eyes and leaned into the windowpane.

“I tried that already. Looks pretty quiet in there. Do you suppose Mr. MacTavish is trying to tell us something?”

“I’ll tell him something if we don’t get inside soon. Right.” She yanked her jacket over her head again. “I’ll go round back. You wait here in case he shows up.”

With one hand against the white wall, Kate carefully picked her way around the side of the building. What once must have been a stone path was now host to a variety of flourishing weeds, and the wet granite and grass along the route was not without its perils. Not until she reached the solid flooring of an ancient patio did Kate feel comfortable looking at something other than her own feet. And the back of the home was as majestic as the front.

Extensions at each end didn’t hold the damp like the center portion; the shade of white seemed to be lighter. As Kate studied the center structure with its jagged walls and wide windows, she knew it was a difference of centuries, not decades. Her hand touched time, manifested in brick and stone, and the house seemed to sigh relief under her touch.

“You are more elegant than I ever imagined,” she whispered to the listening building. “I haven’t even seen your heart, but I love you already.” Her voice hung eerily in the mist, until a faint jingle of a horse’s harness distracted her gentle conversation.

An expanse of garden melted into the white rolling mist. Kate had no frame of reference in the ghostly shroud to fully appreciate the immensity of yard, but she expected it was a fair size by the trimmed hedges that were scattered endlessly in each direction. As the mist softly billowed, small folds would allow her to glimpse beyond the garden to the empty incline of an open field.

And it was there Kate caught a glimpse of a magnificent animal, whose head bowed and nodded at the strengthening pull of the reins from behind.

A puff of mist enveloped the figure while Kate cautiously stepped forward, holding onto the railing of the stairway leading into the army of sculptured hedges. Once she reached the bottom step she stopped and waited.

The gaping space between them danced and swirled continually. As though through carefully planned intervals, the veil teasingly folded back to reveal more of the mysterious creature and its mount. Black edges of a lone figure appeared and vanished again until finally the mist seemed to dissipate from around him completely. He sat, shoulders straight and still, holding the anxious animal quiet with powerful thighs wrapped tightly on shivering flanks. And although the horse seemed more interested in the greenery under his nose, the man stared straight at Kate, neither moving nor speaking. The fog recoiled farther, presenting him with a sudden clarity.

Black hair curled with the damp over the collar of his thick, brown coat, framing stern features. His heavy brow furrowed, square jaw locked while full lips pressed together. He glowered down at her, saying nothing, nor giving any indication he would. In response to a slight movement he dug knee-length boots into the shimmering sides of the horse to steady it. Beneath the long coat a tartan sash of red and blue was the only color other than the dull gray and muted black of shadows the mist revealed.

Their eyes locked. Kate refused to speak. She felt forbidden to do so, as though

she were the intruder, and with any careless word or movement he would usher her, without conscience, into the road. At the same time she was certain she detected a sliver of benevolent curiosity wash across his face. He was studying her deeply, like a stranger on the street who suddenly stops and asks, 'Don't I know you from somewhere?' Then it was gone and the twisted curl of anger returned.

The lips unfurled long enough to give a guttural command to the impatient animal. It raised its head in obedience and jerked knowingly back into the mist from which it was born, taking its master with it.

Kate heard the fading thump of hooves into soft earth, seeing nothing as the fog swallowed both within seconds of retreat. Then the sound, too, evaporated, and she was left feeling incredibly weary and chilled and unsettled. But at the same time a peculiar sense of euphoria tickled warmth into her limbs, soothing a fear that might have otherwise caused her to turn and run. No, a warm hand soothed her heart and sweet lips whispered serenely, "Welcome, my love. Welcome home."

## Chapter Three

Kate woke slowly. The bed, despite appearing lumpy, had been amazingly comfortable. Then again, she had been so blurred from fatigue that a rock for a pillow might have sufficed. She looked around the small bedroom she had blindly chosen the day before and was disappointed that it was so bare and contemporary. White plastered wall, no pictures or tapestries, low ceiling, and the furniture consisted of merely the single bed and a chest of drawers. This was more a bleak hotel room than a medieval home. A flush of excitement stirred her fully awake. She hadn't seen much of the house yet. This was, after all, an extension and she was yet to study the ancient structure.

Then, the memory of the dark figure on horseback flooded back. The man who hovered on the outer ridges of the moor was burned clear and bright in her mind's eye.

Handsome in stature, proud in ancestry, akin to all things wild and free within the moor, she again felt the initial shiver of his wordless presence over her. He had told her volumes with his austere silence: 'You are not wanted here.' 'Turn and go.' 'Take ignorance of my world with you and stay away.'

Yet the house had recognized her ownership and pleaded for her to stay.

Kate slipped her feet onto the bare floor and sighed. "I must have been more tired than I thought." Then she chuckled. "Maybe he was one of Mally's apparitions."

The smile on her lips soon loosened. What if it had been a ghost? She got up to examine the garden from her second story window with a heightened sense of urgency; sunny and warm, the day promised a different reality from the oppressive welcome when they arrived. Thoughts of ghosts soon were vanquished in light of the pleasant scene that stretched out before her.

The garden fanned out from the house in a half circle. Hedges that appeared dismembered in the dullness of the previous afternoon now stood boldly in their entirety, humorously clipped to resemble birds and rabbits. There was even a stag and what looked to be a huge mushroom. A walkway winding along the outer edges and through the middle was periodically dotted with the occasional statuette of mythological figures, part human and part mammal. In the center was an oval cement pond, home, Kate thought, to a few frogs or a rest stop at the very least for passing ducks.

And where the Scottish sky met the horizon was the gentle curve of the brooding moor.

"This is magnificent," she sighed happily. "Amazing how a good rest and sunshine can change one's perspectives."

The noise of feet crunching the gravel beneath attracted Kate's attention. Leaning forward through the screenless window, she expected to see Mally, who by this time had probably explored every nook and cranny the property had to offer. Instead she found herself scrutinizing a ghost, *the* ghost partial to riding horses in the mist and throwing dirty looks at guests. He didn't look quite so threatening in the light. At least he was indeed flesh and bone.

Her first instinct was to lean quietly back inside, but if he was on the grounds

again he probably had a reason. She decided it was time to break the ice, especially seeing that his disposition was made of it. "Good morning," she called cheerfully. "Beautiful day."

The figure froze and for a moment Kate was certain he would ignore her completely. Slowly, stormy and unsettled eyes tipped up to find her.

"Which one are ye?" he asked, teeth clenched.

"Since you ask so sweetly, my name is Katherine Anne Daniels. And apparently this fine home has in part been passed to me." Her good mood prompted the teasing remark.

Without blinking, a shadow fell across the man's humorless cheeks. His bottom lip seemed to shiver before he bit into it. "Weel, Katherine Anne Daniels, seems we have one thing in common then, doesn't it? I, too, have a stake in this property." Shoulders stiffening he continued his trek across the courtyard.

"And you are?" she called after him, leaning a little farther over the casement, but this time he blatantly ignored her. "Other than the local comedian," she said loudly, not caring whether he heard or not. She had little doubt this was Alexander MacTavish.

Dressing quickly, she couldn't help but grow annoyed. Arrogant men. Seems they were everywhere. Either that or they gravitated to her, a cruel joke she was destined to tolerate.

The kitchen was below her bleak bedroom, and it, too, was modern and compact, every corner holding an appliance. Kate had used the last fumes of energy to make a cup of tea before finding a pillow last evening. Now, as she swept into the delightful odor of brewed coffee, she was greeted with more than breakfast.

"And this is my sister, Katie," Mally cooed, her bright blue eyes glazed by the masculine presence within the cramped quarters.

"Aye. We've met."

Kate took a step backwards. Seeing him at a distance in fog and the top of his head from a second story window had warped her perception of his build. She knew he was straight and tall. She had guessed it the way he rode and the determination beneath his feet when he walked, but here, a few feet away, his bulk shadowed her. A thick neck slanted onto wide shoulders, his chiseled arms bulged from the short sleeves of a soft T-shirt. The chest puffed slightly in response to Kate's gaping but the expression remained that of cool suspicion.

"Not really," she managed to get out, meeting his snapping black eyes. "I still don't know who you are."

The brow creased as if to question her intelligence. "I *am* Alexander William MacTavish," he said, with a pride that bordered on challenge.

To his left, Mally mimed a silent pant, tongue hanging out to emphasize her animal attraction. Kate immediately hid a broadening smirk behind her palm and hoped the giant wouldn't take her action as a mocking insult.

"Proprietorship of this home is no laughing matter, Miss Daniels." Reaching into his back pocket he unfolded an official monogrammed letter and snapped it onto the table. Clicking a pen he said, "Sign here and this home will no be trouble to ye any longer."

Kate glanced at the letter and then to the expectant face. "Oh, it's no trouble. My sister and I quite enjoy being part owners of such an exquisite estate, don't we, Mally?"

“Um,” was all Mally could manage without bursting into giggles.

“In fact,” she continued, “we haven’t yet decided what our plans are. But I can tell you this, Mr. MacTavish, whatever decision is made will be of our own making not yours. We shall not be bullied into hastiness. So I suggest you tuck that piece of paper away for now and if needed, we’ll call you.”

The man froze. Fixing his widened dark eyes on Kate he drew a heavy breath, which seemed to nearly double his already expansive chest. “Ye’ll call *me*?” he said incredulously. “I am no a servant in this house, Miss Daniels.” His lips were pulled so tightly that a thin white line encased them.

“I never meant to insinuate you were,” Kate said. Standing her ground bravely, she couldn’t help but feel frightened, especially when he took a step closer to her. She had to tip her chin up to keep staring into his flushed face. She didn’t want to be the first to break the visual lock. “All I’m saying is that we are going to stay while and...” Her voice cracked without intention.

He jumped on the hesitation. “Stay as long as ye like,” he growled without conviction. “But see to it ye stay out of my way.” The next step brought him so near to Kate that her knees weakened. She could feel the heat of anger surging from his body and before brushing past her he twisted sideways and threw one last glare.

Mally clamped a hand over her twisted lips to keep from blurting a response and rolled her eyes in mock amazement. After hearing a door slam, she said, “Aren’t first impressions wonderful?”

“Aye,” Kate repeated. “*I am* Alexander William MacTavish.” Her attempt at sounding Scottish resulted in another fit of giggles. Thinking out loud she added, “Who does he think he is anyway?”

Mally’s smile faded as she thought. “The rightful heir. We’re strangers here and he means to run us off.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“He didn’t have to. The look on his face said it all, don’t you think?”

Kate nodded. “I can’t stop wondering why this place wasn’t left in its entirety to him. There must be someone who can tell us more about what’s going on.”

Mally smiled over the rim of her bone china coffee cup. “I have a feeling there are only two people who could shed some light on all this. One of them is dead, and the other is frightfully annoyed with you.”

“He asked for it. Flouncing about making demands and being rude! Good grief! I would have preferred a congenial old man.”

“Really?” Mally didn’t sound convinced. “I don’t know, sis. He’s awfully nice looking. Even you must have noticed that. Besides, I think he likes you.”

Kate curled her lip with an expression between shock and disgust. “Where would you get that idea?”

Mally shrugged. “Regardless, he *is* part owner and we *will* have to talk to him again, whatever we decide to do. Whatever are we going to do, Katie? I mean, I thought that was the plan. To sell out to him.”

“It still is. But in the meantime, we’ll enjoy our visit, explore the house, the history, the countryside. No hurry. Besides, it will be an added bonus now watching him sweat.”

“I’m impressed,” Mally laughed. “You’ve finally started to fight back.”

“Yes,” Kate agreed with immense satisfaction. “I finally have. And it feels great!”

\* \* \* \*

The east wing extension, Kate guessed, had been built within the last decade, which accounted for its contemporary cheerlessness. She also suspected this was where Campbell spent most of his time, seeing that the cozy living room contained a worn couch, television, phone, and all the necessities for ‘modern’ living for a bachelor. The kitchen and washroom were immediately within reach and the narrow enclosed stairwell wound directly to three bedrooms off the landing, sparse and practical and boring in comparison to the dark antiquity of the main house.

All personal effects of the former resident had been removed. Kate wandered through the rooms half hoping to find a picture or a letter or something that might help in their understanding of who Mr. Campbell had been and why they were here, but her quest was useless. There were no clues here. But this was merely a small section. The rest of the house yawned out to her beyond the low archway.

“Damn,” Mally scowled from the kitchen. “The power’s gone off.”

“Could be a fuse.” Kate tried the television. Nothing. The only noise was the soft tick-tick of a grandfather clock in the foyer. In the stillness its voice had strengthened.

“Guess we have cereal for breakfast, then,” Mally called through a rattle of pans. “Unless of course you want me to find our ... handyman.”

Alexander. Of course! They hadn’t bowed to his wishes to sign everything over to him and now he would resort to nasty tricks to make life for them as uncomfortable as possible. Kate whirled around in her mental revelation to find her own suspicion mirrored by Mally.

“You don’t suppose...” Mally began.

“I do suppose,” Kate snapped. “And I’m not going to put up with his petty games either.” She felt her neck beginning to warm with renewed annoyance. “A little sooner than I expected, but I think I’m just in the mood to share a few feelings with Mr. MacTavish about his insolent behavior.”

“You go, girl.”

Kate shivered with growing anger past the clock in the entrance. The door, huge and heavy as it was, swung open to her touch as though made of cardboard. Wrapping her sweater tightly round her shoulders, she focused on the building across the courtyard and cursed. “You want a fight, my friend, you picked the wrong woman. I have had just about enough of men like you.” She prayed that hearing her own words would help her courage. Not a scrapper by nature, she was already having misgivings about tackling him. Trembling, Kate wondered if it was more from fear than anger.

Stones rolled together beneath her feet, and the building loomed large and foreboding before her eyes.

Swallowing hard she rapped on the doors. The catch hadn’t been shut securely and the hinges creaked painfully as one side swung slowly open.

Kate squinted into the dull light inside. No movement or sound greeted her tumultuous emotion. The thought occurred to her that if he had indeed been miscreant enough to cut the power then he would have done so from the main house, not here. She glanced over each shoulder, half expecting to see him striding across the yard, demanding

to know why she was attempting to intrude on his private oasis. But Alexander MacTavish was nowhere to be seen.

Anger was quickly subsiding into a childlike thrill of mischievousness. Without conscience, Kate pressed her palm on the smooth wood, coaxing it to swing open a little farther. The dullness within became clearer as her eyes adjusted to the light.

Thick black beams crawled up each wall to a point high above her head, creating a sense of immense openness within the stable. Void of animal inhabitation, the rectangular room was divided only once by a makeshift partition that ran across the middle. One side was home to a variety of boxes and crates, piled carelessly around an old car, obviously unused by the amount of dust that blanketed the red paint, but being restored by the hint of oil wafting through the air. The other side took on the warmer appearance of human occupation although the messiness of strewn clothes over tattered furniture made Kate think more of a hovel than a home.

"Mr. MacTavish?" she called softly. Fascination with his interior decorating, or lack of, had all but squashed her intent to engage in an argument. She stepped farther inside.

An unmade bed, a decrepit chair piled with clothes, and a lamp with no shade. A recliner situated in front of a stone fireplace against the outer wall looked as though it were home to a variety of rodents. There were also several makeshift shelves of books, both hardcover and paperback, a desk, a sink and small fridge, but no oven. Nor was there a television or a phone. The twenty-first century hadn't crept into this room yet. Basic was the only word Kate could think to explain this environment. And crude.

Tacked on the beam that protruded from the wall near the bed were several photographs, overlapping and frayed, and Kate was overwhelmed with curiosity. Without considering her intrusion she crept across the woven circular rug, taking care to remain soundless, to steal a closer look at the black and white snapshots, many of which were frayed and smudged from handling. She recognized none as Alexander, however a few had the same austere features--high forehead, dark serious eyes, square jaw. One was of an elderly gentleman in full highland dress of kilt, tartan sash thrown over his left shoulder and pinned with a silver brooch. James Stewart Campbell, she guessed, despite no written title. Perhaps the old man's personal artifacts were here. Perhaps the answers to her questions were being hidden away, deliberately, another ploy of the brooding Alexander MacTavish. The thought reminded her why she was standing in this room to begin with. But before she had the chance to turn to leave, a massive weight was ruthlessly pinning her against the wall.

Kate's hands automatically flew into the beam in an attempt to keep from being crushed. She gasped for breath despite the attempt, her cheek flattened on the cool smooth surface. One large but gentle hand held her shoulder, the other inched its way around her waist. Leather squeaked from the chest that kept her motionless in the uncomfortable stance. And the faint smell of cologne tickled her nose as a stubble face pressed into her neck.

"Katherine Anne Daniels," a low sensuous voice purred in her ear. "For what reason do I have the pleasure of your company?"

She twisted but the muscle of his arm flexed, the fingers on her stomach curled. Swallowing a heart that hammered in her throat Kate tried to breathe. "You're hurting me. Let go."



“No.” True to his word, he did not free his grip. Neither did he strengthen it. “Not till I hear what ye have to say.”

His warm breath puffed into her ear, he shifted his weight slightly and she felt, to her horror, a hardening between his thighs. “I’ll scream,” she threatened, her words barely a whimper.

“Why would ye do that?” he purred.

Before she could answer, or think, the feathered touch of full lips pressed into her neck with a tenderness that contradicted the harshness of his captive hold. Kate winced. “No, don’t,” she pleaded, her voice merely a whisper.

As she waited for him to answer she struggled internally with the discovery that his body against her was far from revolting. In actuality, she felt a tingle of sensual excitement in the bottom of her stomach.

The lips found her earlobe, wet and soft, he murmured, “Ye want me, don’t ye, Katie?” His palm inched under her sweater; the thumb gently stroked her trembling bare skin. “That’s why ye came here, is that no right?”

“No.” Her protest sounded hollow, unconvincing even to her. Eyes closed she bit hard into her bottom lip to keep from crying. “No, that’s not right.”

“Ye tell me no with your words but yes with your body.” His kiss inched under the curve of her jaw. “I can feel your heart. I know I excite ye.”

“You frighten me,” she confessed. Honestly, she hoped, would loosen his stranglehold. Surely he wasn’t really the animal he was portraying.

“Good. If you’re frightened ye will please me more.” The hand under her sweater was working its way closer to her breast. His breath grew heavier, the thighs pushed harder into her back. Tipping his head so to speak directly into her ear he said with an eerie calmness, “Listen, and listen well. I mean to see my name and my name alone on the deed for that house. You and your sister have no right to it. No right at all.” Hesitating as though to make certain she fully understood the complexities of what he was saying, he sighed deeply. The leather jacket crunched as his arm maneuvered, following the path of the hand that had now fully engulfed her breast. “That’s not to say we can’t enjoy each other’s company for a wee while first.”

“Get your filthy paws off me,” Kate spit, the sensuality evaporating with lightning speed. “I shall have no part in your intimidation.” A surge of adrenaline rocketed through her body, temporarily blinding her within a wash of red. She wrenched with a power and velocity that caused her to stagger slightly when he loosened his hold. Whirling around she thrust her hand up in an attempt to slash her nails into the smile that greeted her anger. Lacking speed she found her wrist being clutched and her balance tipped. She fell backwards into the unmade bed.

Bouncing once, she lunged with her fists at his chest to make good her escape. The attempt, however, was futile. She was no match for the man who pinned her to the bed, his arms locked by her sides, and to her utter amazement, she was pleased for her weakness. Peering up into his eyes she saw, not the piercing glare of the animal he had tried to convince her he was, but a shadow of deep affection and want. Hypnotized by the liquid pools that bore into her, she watched as he lowered his parted lips, slow motion, towards her mouth. Who was this man who suddenly seemed enraptured with her? Who had the drowsy appearance of ... love? The pools disappeared behind closing lids and with a gasp she welcomed his kiss, deep, penetrating, the promise of ecstasy

seducing her into submission.

Submission. It was the property he wanted, not her. Kate's sleepy eyes snapped wide to attention as she fought to renew her resolve. Jerking her head away from his lips she growled, "Get off me, damn you."

For a split second his brow wrinkled in confusion. Then a muscle in his flushed cheek flickered and through a renewed scowl he said, "Aye, just like a Daniels, pretending to struggle but begging for it at the same time."

That was it. Kate could tolerate him no longer. "Don't presume to lump me in with the harlots someone like you spends company with." And with that she drew her knee up with as much force as she could muster and caught him, as she had intended, right between his legs.

His eyes widened in shock, the light within dimmed. It wasn't a hard strike but enough to gain the upper hand. Now or never, Kate threw her shoulders up, pushing his new weightlessness to one side with the minimum of effort. He rolled, doubled over and groaned with pain. As she raced to the door and freedom beyond, she heard what she suspected was a curse in Gaelic.

Kate stopped and turned in triumphant glory. "Consider *that* your signature, Mr. MacTavish. Negotiations will continue only when you learn a few manners."

Slapping her palms together she headed for the house, the warm glow of power spilling throughout her body, and the sweetness of his taste lingering on her lips.

## Chapter Four

It was no surprise to Kate that the power was restored later that morning. In preparation for the worst, Mally had fished about in drawers for flashlight batteries or at the very least candles and matches and had an assortment lying out on the counter. “Good to know where these things are,” she said when the fridge hummed to life. “In case it happens again.”

Most of the incident in the stables Kate kept to herself. No sense upsetting Mally, especially since she was all set to go shopping. She’d protectively shadow Kate if told the whole story and solitude was more the order of the afternoon. Besides, she had the house to explore and was looking forward to obliterating the outside world, including Alexander MacTavish, by getting lost within the charm of antiquity. It had, after all, whispered her only welcome.

The foyer encompassed both the front and back entrances. Wide oak stairs joined to a landing and then wound to the second story. Little sunlight crept along the stone floor. If not for the soft chimes of the Grandfather clock, she would have had to squint to see the numbers. A huge tapestry hung on what was once the outside wall, the colors dull and muted. The scene depicted mythological creatures dancing amongst an array of fanciful flora. Kate fluttered fingertips over the edges and marveled at the skilled hands and exceptional eyesight to create such fine stitching. Behind this heavy wall was the east wing and the twentieth century.

Strolling steadily would lead her through each room and back to the foyer in a matter of minutes. But her hunger to study the architecture and what was left of the furnishings was too great a force to argue. Commencing her tour with the back room she stepped first into the brilliantly illuminated expanse of what must have been a banquet hall. Longer than it was wide, it stretched the full length of the ancient building, cathedral-like windows revealing an excellent view of the garden’s clipped majesty. Sunlight streaked across a wooden floor, the boards smooth from centuries of wear. Kate stepped lightly. She imagined the swish of long ballooned gowns and the clap of shoes to music, long suppressed with the endless journey of time.

Two fireplaces, at each end of the room, were broad enough to comfortably burn a whole tree. The high ceilings demanded a constant fire, she thought. Summer heat poured through the windows now, but warding off the bitter winds of winter must have been a constant challenge. Between the mantles were five oil paintings, each depicting men dressed in tartan costumes, sturdy fingers gripping sword hilts, ready for battle. Chins tipped heavenward in defiance, proud eyes glared from beneath confident brows. Kate wondered if it was the artist’s style that their features, stance and coloring were so similar, or if these were members of one family, sons and grandsons, who had accomplished feats worthy to have their sober images displayed in this place of privilege and commendation. She suspected the latter.

Drifting to the end of the room she passed the only articles of furniture left here, carelessly clumped together under the far window ledge: a trestle table, four stools, and a

cedar chest. Futile as she knew it to be, she attempted nonetheless to open the chest. Correct in her assumption, it was locked.

The rooms overlooking the front courtyard were sectioned evenly in fourths, each with one window, and each with a fireplace, small and blocked. Except for clumps of dust balling in the corners the space was bare; the walls free of painting and tapestry. Her footsteps echoed slightly as she quickened her pace back towards the foyer and the stairway.

Gliding her palm gracefully on the metal railing, Kate smiled at childish imagination. She was a princess, or a lady of honor, visiting the estate to the nervousness of her rich, moody host, who busied himself making sure the legion of staff members had food prepared correctly and that the fires were stoked properly and that her chambers were prepared properly for a woman of her stature.

Unfortunately, imagination dictated that her host looked akin to a MacTavish and she was not amused by his tactless displays of masculine attention, nor the manner in which she kept thinking about him.

She was still smiling when she reached the upstairs hall and turned into the first bedroom.

Kate wavered. She had expected another dreary room, empty except for a muted memory of a past, which had died long ago with its former inhabitants. What greeted her was quite the contrary. This room was rich in color, from tapestries on every wall to a Turkish rug on the floor. The fireplace had a grate containing the charred remnants of logs, the stain of smoke inched up the flu. Books lined the mantle between two sitting porcelain dogs. The furniture was a rich honey-colored gold, magnified by the sunlight coaxing the brilliance to sparkle: a chair with an embroidered cushion, a chest of drawers with short stubby legs, a chest, bearing folded blankets at the bottom of the bed.

The canopied bed was a creation of beauty. Fine detailed embroidery wove through the lush velvety material pulled back to expose the quilted interior. Carved dark brown wood rimmed the top, pointed at each end with the menacing face of a wild boar, which seemed to watch her with sardonic interest. The headboard, too, was immaculately carved with geometrical designs leading to an inscription that read: *Non Oblitus*. Latin. 'Non' meant not, but 'oblitus'. Kate shook her head.

"This bed's been recently slept in," she mumbled, reaching to smooth down the covers that were turned and rumpled. The cabinet beside the bed held pewter candlesticks, the half burned candles made of bee's wax. A leather-bound book rested nearby, overturned. Kate glanced to the floor. Were there slippers as well?

She stumbled backwards to the seat by the window, the sun warm, and an assurance of reality on her shoulders. But she could not wrench her eyes from the luxuriousness of a room rich and alive. Who? Alexander? Was he sneaking about at night claiming a chamber as his own private oasis, unbeknownst to her and Mally? The thought was suddenly unsettling, even though their quarters were in an isolated wing. But after the trick he tried to pull on her that morning...

As though expecting to see him outside in the gardens, Kate turned, squinting in the sunshine. "I'll have to speak with him," she thought aloud. The garden was empty, except for the silent hedges and their fluttering heartbeat of nesting birds.

*Katrina.*

Barely audible, the voice saturated the room, betraying in an instant impenetrable

sadness, loss, and abandonment.

Kate whirled, a flip of hair caught on her cheek. “Who’s there?” she demanded, every muscle tightening. Unconsciously she stood, back to the wall, searching for the source of the whisper she had clearly heard.

Nothing. No secret forsaken, nothing changed, or moved, or sighed.

A swirl of icy air, like bony fingers, wrapped around her neck stealing what little breath she had struggled to retain. The strand of hair on her cheek loosened and fell limp in confirmation the breeze was real and the distinct puff tickled her ear, from within came a long moan.

*Ka-trin-a.*

Flesh crawling, every small hair on her arm and neck immediately stood to attention. She was painfully aware that her heart hammered triple time, jolting life-saving adrenaline through her veins to make an escape, pooling in her trembling hands and legs. But her feet, curse them, were immobile, glued to the golden floor, and her eyes wide in a panic she had never known, neither blinked nor changed focus--she stared straight ahead--at the malignant glare of a carved boar’s head.

She had no courage to acknowledge the invisible owner of the voice, yet she was certain he stood beside her. A man, wronged, troubled and in pain was reaching out to her with a cold desperate cry for help. A shadow moved, silently apologizing for the hurt he had caused, silently pleading for warmth in a place wrought with stinging cold, silently begging not to be forgotten.

Not forgotten. Non Oblitus. Kate glanced from the boar’s tusked head to the inscription. Non Oblitus meant Not Forgotten.

Her breast shivered to a sudden intake of air. And why she said it, she didn’t understand. She simply said it. Steady, meaningfully and calmly: “I have not forgotten.”

The shadow dissolved, yet the emptiness lingered, deep and endless. Kate knew if she moved within its space she would be lost there, as tortured and trapped as the soul who threw down the heavy cloak for a minute, a blink, a wrinkle of time within eternity. Long enough to call out for help, and then dissolve again into the murky depths of the loveless pit called hell.

Without knowledge or permission from the rest of her body, Kate’s feet carried her down the stairs, across the stone floor of the foyer and into the green carpet of the garden. A place teeming with life, she embraced its sanctuary. Whirling about, she peered up at the window on the second story. What did she expect to see, a face peering back at her?

Finding a bench she slumped onto it, picking mindlessly at a small clump of lichen inching into the rock. Safely ensconced in the open yard, Kate flipped through her internal filing cabinet of logical solutions. She was unnerved from the morning wrestling match, still coping with the time change, to say nothing of the shock of finding the unexpected signs of habitation in that room and that room alone. And she was certainly taking liberties with romantic assumptions. The sound was nothing more than wind circulating its way down the flu, or even through a crack around the window casing. Her imagination picked up where natural phenomena left off. That was all. Very simple.

Kate’s fingers gnarled into the satisfying twist of a mock strangulation. “Mally, I could choke you for filling my head with this mindless supernatural nonsense.”

Already she was dismissing the incident. It barely warranted further

consideration.

She peeked up at the window once more to confirm that no ashen face was framed within, but could not seem to shake a lingering thought that she had come in contact with the unexplainable. She decided, for the sake of sanity, to keep her temporary madness solely to herself.

\* \* \* \*

Mally's shoes clanked and clamored over each stone slab. She burst into the living room with packages of pastry, fruit, vegetables, and tucked under her arm a bouquet of flowers. "I popped into one shop after another, all along the main street. Me and every housewife from the village." She unloaded her treasures on the kitchen counter and talked as she found plastic and foil for every edible treasure. Through a sausage roll lodged in her mouth she muttered, "Went into the pub, too." A spray of crumbs splattered from her chin.

Arranging the flowers in a blue bottle from under the sink, she went on, "People are so friendly. Had more than one offer to buy me a drink. Once they found out I was Canadian I was entertaining quite a crowd." She cracked a laugh and joined Kate on the couch. "You wouldn't believe the stories surrounding this place."

Kate shot a 'don't you dare start' look.

"What's wrong? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh, no reason. Except I went poking about upstairs and got the really uncomfortable feeling I was being watched, which was unsettling enough without you throwing in a few gruesome stories that gave the locals a good laugh at your expense." So much for keeping the episode a secret.

"Being watched? Really?" Mally stopped chewing. "See anything?"

"No."

"Hear anything?"

"Nothing more than the wind in the flu."

Mally squinted suspicion. "What did the flu say?"

"Stop it, would you. Isn't it enough we have the living to contend with around here without stirring up images of misty apparitions?"

Swallowing the last of the sausage roll, Mally started. "They say the house has been quiet for some time, but there have been a few sightings recently. A Highlander on horseback searching the moors, especially when the moon is full. He rides like a bat out of hell towards the house and then whoosh! He disappears." Her whole face lifted to the 'whoosh'.

Kate screamed internally. "You're off again, aren't you?"

"What?" The innocence of the question was edged with confusion. "Do you honestly think that a house hundreds of years old could not hold the souls of those who lived and probably died here?"

Kate fought the shiver running down her spine. The heavy emptiness she had felt pressed down on her heart again, the memory still fresh and hauntingly real. Someone had reached cold fingers from the dark chasm of beyond in hopes she would hear and help. And she didn't believe. She wouldn't. "No," she stated, and startled both of them with the severity of her tone. "No, I don't believe a building of wood and stone can hold something as elusive as the human soul. Even a troubled one."

"Who said anything about a troubled one?"

“Don’t all ghosts have psychological problems? That’s why you lot are so good at giving them therapy.”

“Okay. Mock me if you will, but you can’t argue with statistics and thousands of sightings a year can’t be shrugged away as mass hysteria.” She headed for the foyer, stopping in the arched doorway. “Not believing doesn’t mean it’s not true. I’m going to nose around. Want to come?” She watched Kate carefully, honing in on the slightest facial contortions. She could read her sister like a book.

Kate cleared her throat. “That’s fine. You go without me. And say hello from me if you bump into anyone ... or anything interesting.”

“And in which room should I be bumping into anyone or anything interesting?”

“Try the bedroom off the landing,” Kate grinned. “The ghost that’s been sleeping in that bed likes to read by candlelight.”

*Disjointed, out of focus, white mist. The house, the foyer, the bedroom. Crawling beneath the covers, cloaked in absolute stillness. An instant drenching of complete contentment, happiness, love. And an intolerable yearning to be touched, stroked, caressed.*

*Rustling, stirring, awakening, within reach. His face glowed, silhouetted by shining long locks, velvet eyes, silk, blackness, full and empty, both. Lips, wet, round, parted in speech. But there was no sound, no vibration, no meaning.*

*Her chest tightened, expanded, tightened again. Through haze, must touch him, must show him, must promise. He was closer, nostrils flaring, heat pulsating, trembling, mouth possessing her, pushing. Harder, yes, dear love. Kiss harder.*

*Take me. I will follow.*

*The palm massaged her breast and fire leapt, grew, and responded with a torrent of heat, gushing like water through her stomach, her thighs, her want.*

*He smelled her; he knew; he understood. Waterfall of hair, muscle, weight. His body flushed, eyes closed, mouth open. No existence or time or place.*

*Forbidden love. Unspoken. Unrelenting. Unforgotten.*

*But still, forbidden.*

*Back arched, legs parted. Relinquish to memory of total possession. Taste salt, smell lust, feel the power of his sex, claiming, bonding, forever. Two bodies, two hearts, two souls.*

*Forever.*

*I love you.*

*And then the wrenching scream of cold icy breath. Anguish. Madness. A sorrow too deep, too vile, too torturous for one man to bear.*

*Katrina! Katrina!*

Kate bolted straight up, the cry still echoing in her skull. Twilight filtered through thin curtains. Wiping the film of moisture from her forehead, damp seeping from the hollow of her neck, she twisted to see the clock. Three thirty. She was wide-awake, running the sultry images of a dimming dream from her mind’s eye.

“Good God,” she whispered, clutching her chest. “Where did that come from?”

All her senses were keenly heightened. Kate felt the light trickle of sweat gluing the cotton t-shirt to her breast, her ears picked up the soft tick of the Grandfather clock through three closed doors, her eyes distinguished every shade of gray dancing on the

wall, and the taste--she touched her lips--she could still taste the sweetness of that kiss.

Sleep would be impossible now. She grabbed her robe, dug toes into tattered slippers and had a firm grip on the latch when she stiffened--the dream gone, her mind clear, yet the urge to go to the window welled up from within like an inexplicable gush of spring water from a stone. Alone, with only the impenetrable peace of early morning, that delicate eerie place between severe darkness and brilliant daylight, she heeded the call and drifted to the window.

The orange glow of the moon, tipping towards the blurred edges of the horizon, cast shadows over the purple moor. Nothing moved. No creature stirred beneath the small flowers, no bird preened its feathers in preparation for the day ahead, no puff of wind to wake the sleeping inhabitants. Kate felt that she was the only witness to a desolate lonely world, the only member who could not rest. But already there was the faint pale streak of a triumphant birth. The night's back was broken.

A dark spot, far off on a mound of shadow beneath the moon, moved and then vanished into a basin of earth. And when the image reappeared it was larger, looming closer at an alarming speed. Certainly distance on the moors was deceiving. A glade or a hill, seemingly a stone's throw away, turned out to be unreachable. But this--this was a panic-driven speed regardless of distance, and Kate stiffened at the urgency. Within seconds there would be a burst of noise.

But, no. Gone. The calmness returned. The landscape sighed, relieved to fall into a few more minutes of rest before....

The horse's scream shattered illusions of peace. Hooves frantically pounded into the earth, its mane rippled with each frenzied jolt of the shivering mass of muscle. The head rolled at unseen danger and foam filtered from the bit, which clanked in rhythm to its command to draw closer.

The rider was indistinguishable. Between lack of light and distance the face was featureless, an obscure mask of nothingness. His wide shoulders, however, were bent in determination, inches away from the horse's neck, translating the need for haste. Life itself depended on it.

Kate automatically stepped to one side hiding behind the curtain without breaking her stare. What was going on? Why would Alexander MacTavish be out riding the moors this time of the day, or night? She squinted to find the dark features she had first seen the evening she arrived.

Electricity crackled in her ears. A rush of blood bashed into her temple.

The rider had no face.

Thick black rings of hair bounced over his shoulders, pale white of exposed flesh around his neck and forearms. There was an instant glimmer of steel by his side, thighs thick and tense clamped into the horse's belly, and the stark contrast of red against the cold hue of blue. A kilt. The slash of color wrapped around his waist and one shoulder and flapped into the hair that waved straight down his back.

But no face.

Closer. Soon she would see with clarity. She had to. Logic and sanity depended upon it. The horse neared the outer edges of the garden.

Despair, terror, loss. And then nothing. No horse. No rider. No sound.

Kate's blood ran cold. Flesh on her arms and neck shivered fine hairs to attention.



One cheerful twitter shattered the trance and Kate answered with her own short shriek. Palm over her mouth, solidly fixated, she listened as the moor immediately sprang to life with the answering chorus of birds.

Cautiously she leaned over the casing. Did he ride past the corner of the house? Why could she no longer hear the horse's excited snorting?

Vanished. Both the horse and the rider.

The garden was alive with tiny voices and Kate's acute vision saw even the slightest of scurrying within the hedges. Beyond this the moors, too, was abuzz with noise to greet the day, which had suddenly burst to life. Yet there was no creature larger than a hare.

Stricken with a pain in her forehead, Kate wrapped her robe more securely around her middle. Her first impulse was to wake Mally and tell her the vision that unfolded on the stretch of moor, but she would have to make the whole thing sound casual and normal. Her shattered nerves would betray the façade and the last thing she wanted, or needed, was Mally's 'I told you so' in regards to a mystic Highlander galloping toward the house and then disappearing.

But disappear he did.

Kate shivered. What if it was true?

"Nonsense," she said to the walls. It was nothing more than their co-inheritor, satisfying his eccentric whims or bouts of insomnia by flitting about in the darkness flogging a poor horse to exhaustion in the process. Fitting, if he was nocturnal, a barbaric fixture of an untamed wilderness. Very fitting indeed.

Free, unbridled, and teasingly savage--as she strung the thought together with the image of his olive-colored complexion and wild eyes, the sting of barbarous cruelty softened. And for a moment she luxuriated in an odd wash of jealousy. Hers was a cheerless existence, trapped within sensibility and caution, as real as the bird in a gilded cage. What wonder it must be to ride, exuberant and careless, feeling nothing but the cool air and the continuous motion of the horse's knowing stride, without care or tribulation. She ached to taste such deliverance.

A shiver of crawling flesh reminded her with an abrupt start--with her own eyes she saw, she knew, she was certain--for these liberties the rider had lost his soul, and his face.

## Chapter Five

Over breakfast Mally theorized at great length about the furnished bedroom. Using her fork as a pointer, a small blob of egg yolk clung perilously to the utensil as she shared each idea. “There are several plausible explanations...”

“Plausible? Makes a switch for you, doesn’t it?”

Shrugging off Kate’s sarcasm Mally continued. “That could have been Campbell’s recluse. Maybe he slept there and this,” she waved the fork indicating the small living quarters of the extension, “was where he spent the day. Or it could be that before we got here your friend, Mr. MacTavish slept there.”

“He’s not my friend.”

“The question begs,” Mally said, “not necessarily ‘who’, but why that room?”

The corners of Kate’s mouth pinched shut. She knew her sister would lead into the supernatural before long. Her plausible explanations always did.

“An odd karma there,” she said. “You felt it, and I bet they did as well.”

“I felt the wind gush down the flu. There are drafts in old houses.”

“Um. Amongst other things.” Mally scratched her chin in thought. “Maybe the room is a shrine.”

“A shrine?”

“Yeah, a special place of reverence.”

“I know what a shrine is. I don’t know where you get these ridiculous ideas.”

“Katie, we need to find out more about the history of this place: when it was built, the families who lived here, those who died here. I will just bet that that room has a very special significance.” Mally’s eyes widened with delight. She did love research and now she had her teeth firmly clenched into her theory, Kate knew there would be no letting go.

“Whatever happened to a few weeks rest and relaxation? I thought that was the whole idea of our coming here, before selling out to the Midnight Rider.”

“This is relaxing,” Mally chirped. “And what do you mean, ‘Midnight Rider’?”

Kate sighed deeply and pinched the growing throb between her eyes. Pushing her chair back she said, “I mean MacTavish. Who else?”

“You saw something, didn’t you?” There was an excited pitch in Mally’s voice. “You saw something and you’re keeping it from me. The Highlander! Oh, Katie. Tell me!”

“Calm down.” Kate planted both palms on the table and leaned forward. With a counteracting calmness she quietly continued. “I woke early and saw Alexander out riding across the moors. That’s all. Nothing more.”

Mally’s eyes narrowed. “Are you certain it was him? I mean it could have been...”

“I’m certain. Remember the day we got here? Where was he and what was he doing?”

Mally nodded, regretfully. Disappointment was loosening the tension in her cheeks.

“He has eccentric habits, to say the least,” Kate went on, “and galloping about on horseback in the still of the night, probably favoring the full moon, is one of them. If your drinking friends at the pub tell you about the ghostly sightings of a Highlander then you can bet your bottom dollar, or pound, that it’s Alexander MacTavish they’ve been seeing.” Sermon over.

“I hope you’re wrong,” Mally mumbled. “Practicality is so boring.”

Kate straightened. Annoyed, she said, “You need someone to keep that frizzy head of yours out of the clouds.”

“Let’s ask him,” Mally protested. “That is, if you haven’t scared him off.”

“As if! He won’t go far. He’s protecting his estate. In fact, he’s probably hoping to literally scare us off and I, for one, am not falling for it. Now, before this develops into a full blown argument, let’s change the subject.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to find out about the history. We’ll just leave out the ghost angle.”

“Fine by me. So what are your plans for the day?”

Mally gathered the dirty dishes, clanked the plates together with uncharacteristic roughness. “I’m revisiting the village--the library this time--and maybe the church. Research. Want to come with me?” Her invitation sounded insincere.

“No. Actually, since it’s such a nice day, I think I’ll go for a walk on the moor.”

Mally hesitated, picking words carefully. “Don’t get lost.” Dishes clattered into the sink. “And watch out for those wild inhabitants.”

Kate saw the smirk, but ignored it.

\* \* \* \*

A telltale sign of her sanity would be visible hoof marks in the soft earth. With such convincing evidence, Kate could insist with confidence that the apparition was one of flesh and bone. The identity of the rider was second only to affirmation of her sanity. And to whom was she proving this? By the fanaticism of her search, Kate realized it was a personal quest to quell her own apprehension.

The lines between the arrogant caretaker and the mystical philanderer were blurred.

Kate searched where the clipped grass of the lawn curved into the flowering heather of the moor, studying every section with care. Certainly an animal of that size would mold the ground distinctively. Frustrated, she glanced toward the bedroom window and measured as well as she could the general area from which she was sure the gallant steed approached the house. Turning, her heart leapt. There was a path after all, almost completely obscured within low tangled shrubbery.

Once finding the mouth of the path, Kate could see it wind through the moor like a thin pale snake, disappearing only when the ground dipped. Prints indicated that this was indeed a well-trodden route. “Ah-ha!” she exclaimed aloud. “Ghosts! This one has a very solid beast of burden.” She couldn’t wait to share this realistic morsel of information with Mally.

For the meantime, however, she would be a trailblazer and see how far it would lead.

Distance was impossible to judge. The hill that appeared to be within reach stubbornly hovered on the horizon. Kate’s caution manifested into several glances over her shoulder, secure that one familiar landmark, the house, stayed within view, even

though it grew smaller. Insatiable curiosity drove her farther despite Mally's warning not to get lost. Kate was confident in the path beneath her feet. Even if the house vanished from sight the crooked trail would see her safely home.

Home. How could she be so brazen as to refer to Kirkland Hall as her home? From where she stood on a mound of tangled heather and sheep droppings, the house was so small she could pinch the whole thing in a tiny space between her thumb and forefinger. Bricks and stone--it was merely a novelty to her. There was no warmth of family or familiarity. Its history had nothing to do with her. Yet if a building had a heartbeat she had felt its gentle rhythm, a slight sigh, and an odd comfort from being there. Like a few kind words, or an old song, the sight of it made her sentimental.

If she had such tender feelings after a few days how much more must be in the heart of one Alexander MacTavish?

Kate found a dry, clear patch of ground and sat down, using a small mound of rocks as a backrest. Several sheep popped up from their resting places in preparation to dash off if this intruder wandered too close. Once they saw that she was no threat, they casually resumed chewing, drifting through ankle-high weeds like wooly vacuum cleaners. Now she was in their home feeling very much an orphan without family or friend--at the very least, an unwelcome guest.

The rugged handsomeness of Alexander drifted through her mind. She even allowed the memory of his touch, harsh as the circumstances had been, to tease the curves of flesh. He would not have hurt her, she was as certain of it. His kiss was too tender, the depths of his eyes shimmered with a passion he kept restrained within a need for secrecy. No, he had been genuine, and for a fleeting instant they had both forgotten their battle. His passion--she had seen the sincerity, where? The paintings! The oil paintings on the wall of the study--were all those proud figures of the clan MacTavish?

How had the property come into a Campbell's possession?

Kate sighed. She knew so little about the ways of the Scottish people. Rather than sitting out here in the middle of nowhere, she should have gone with Mally to help in her historical research. Except her aim was to dig up more legend, superstition and folklore rather than fact.

The quiet of the buzzing summer heat was interrupted only by the occasional bleat of sheep. Sun on her cheeks, Kate closed her eyes to rest for a few moments.

A damp chill startled her, and stiff muscles brought her upright. The sheep were gone. So was the delicious buzzing noise that had lured her into slumber. The moor was suddenly very small. A dense fog had materialized from nowhere, blanketing her resting place with invisibility. Kate's heart skipped a beat. The path. Which way was it? Her bearings had evaporated with the sun.

"Stay calm," she said, taking a deep breath and scanning the circumference of the rocks. Gray fingers wiggled in and out at her along the ground, chiding her foolishness. 'Silly girl', they wagged. 'Fall asleep and now you're lost. Serves you right.' The wisps would curl and fold. Their hypnotic waltz did nothing to calm her growing panic.

Sensibility demanded she stay put and hope that the fog would soon recede far enough that she could find the path. Once there she could pick her way, on hands on knees if she had to, back to the garden. Without the guidance of the tiny trail she would have no hope, wandering aimlessly, lost and alone, for God knows how long. It didn't bear thinking about.

Hugging her waist, she slumped into the hollow of earth around the stones. The cold and damp was beginning to seep through her clothes and her hair hung limp. What if the fog didn't lift before night? The prospect of sleeplessly sharing these rocks with untold slithering wildlife, in the dark, sent a shiver down her spine. She fought the urge to run screaming into the fog and laughed nervously at the image of such foolishness. Kate wrapped her arms around her knees, and waited. There was nothing else she could do.

Fear, she knew, would play tricks with the mind and heavy air would magnify even the smallest of sounds. Couple the two and the recipe for irrational thought was born. So when the slow thump-thump of earth being disturbed reached her ears, she was certain that soon the faceless Highlander would find her hiding place and command she return with him into the oblivion of another time. The noise was louder now. And in defiance to her growing superstitious weakness, Kate stood and peered into the dense air.

"Hello?" she called faintly. More than the cold caused her knees to wobble.

A horse snorted. The thump-thump stopped.

"Hello?" she called again, louder this time, convinced there was still too much light of day for ghosts to be out gallivanting. "Is anybody there?"

The mist swirled to make way for a mass of blackness that slowly began to materialize. A great oblong head nodded at a pull of the reins, pointed ears flickered. Kate swept her eyes higher. This rider definitely had a face--Alexander MacTavish--and that face was glibly twisted in controlled amusement.

Relief and annoyance struggled for supremacy. She was beginning to wish ghosts did exist. The prospect of riding off into eternity with a spirit was suddenly preferable to this. Her fists doubled in anticipation of ridicule. The worst part of the whole situation was that she likely deserved the inevitable scolding she was about to receive.

Alexander folded his arms, leaning on the horse's mane. The saddle squeaked to the shift in his weight. "Usually sheep shelter here in bad weather, but I don't see virgin wool on ye." There was laughter in his voice.

"I can't imagine any sheep in a thirty mile radius having virgin wool with the likes of you living here."

"Very cocky remarks from a wee lassie lost on the moors. Perhaps ye want me to just leave ye here then." The horse nodded again and rolled bullet eyes as though enjoying his master's remark.

"No. I don't relish the thought of staying out here any longer. But neither do I want to be assaulted by you again."

"I could say the same." A smirk pressed one corner of his mouth.

"You deserved that," Kate said.

"Aye. I suppose I did."

An awkward silence followed. Alexander straightened. His suede coat draped over the horse's sides, the color melting together, making the two appear as one. He stroked the mane, soothing a shimmer of flesh on the animal's neck.

"Do ye ride?" he asked, not once taking his eyes from her. "Or do ye want to follow along behind?"

'And look at two asses instead of one,' she thought, but decided it best not to say. No sense annoying her only hope of rescue. "I can ride," she said confidently.

"I just bet ye can." His eyes swept over her body.

Kate felt heat rush into her cheeks. "I don't appreciate that tone, Mr. MacTavish. I'll have you know that...."

With athletic grace he swung a leg over the saddle and soundlessly hit the ground. "Come on. I'll help you up."

Kate flounced forward, shrugging off assistance. "I don't need any help," she stated with authority. A massive velvet nose swung, nearly bumping her off balance, questioning what was happening. Reins held secure, Kate heaved herself into the saddle.

"Sassy creature, aren't ye?" Alexander hoisted up in position behind her with a grace she envied. Settling comfortably he gently held the rein with one hand while the other casually wrapped around her stomach. He issued a short clicking sound and their journey back began.

Kate immediately relinquished her frustration at the delicious sensation of the firm chest squeezed into her back. His posture was so straight and tall she was certain his bone was made of steel and every muscle, leather. Warmth from his body permeated into her shoulders and the hand on her stomach radiated a small pool of heat that fluttered through her waist. Safety. Security. Slowly she began to relax.

Besides the dense mist and the horse's bobbing head there, was nothing to look at. The quiet demanded to be broken. She searched for something to say. Embarrassed by their required intimacy, she blurted, "How did you find me?"

"Yer sister said ye followed the trail. She asked me to look for ye."

Kate closed her eyes at the smooth breath on her neck. Fine hairs fluttered in response. Suppressing the urge to scratch the tickle, she wiggled her shoulder. Automatically his arm tightened. "Oh," she mumbled, unconscious that her hand had suddenly clasped his, until a finger flinched. "Oh," she started again. "Sorry." She wrenched her hand away.

"I don't mind," he whispered into her ear, his voice feathery and suggestive.

"You must spend a lot of time out on these moors," she babbled, desperately trying to find a sober topic to calm her sudden dizziness. "I mean, I can't see a thing. How do you know we're going in the right direction?"

"Instinct."

How appropriate, she mused. All creatures relied heavily on instinct. She had to keep reminding herself he was arrogant and rude and...

The chest behind her expanded, inching her slightly forward, giving the distinct impression he was going to say something. The expectancy of breath on her skin, she tilted her head to welcome the pleasurable sensation. A short expulsion indicated a puff of laughter. She didn't have to see his expression to know he was teasing her.

She stiffened. "Mr. MacTavish," she scolded, as demurely as possible. She did, after all, want to get safely home without enraging her host.

"Alex," he purred. "My name is Alex." His shoulders slumped, his chin brushing her neck.

"Mr. MacTavish," she repeated. "I don't know what opinion you have of me, but I do not appreciate unwelcome gestures, regardless of how intimate this situation may seem at the moment."

"Stop yer caterwauling, woman," he laughed. "Yer enjoying this as much as I am. I wouldna doubt ye got lost on purpose."

Kate's fists clenched in frustration. She was enjoying this, but she didn't want

him to know it. Nor should he flatter himself. "Look," she shivered, "This is a necessary evil, one I'll tolerate. I did not intend on getting lost and I certainly don't make a habit of roaming about all hours of the day or night like you do." Words spit from a gut seething with a growing anger. "I saw you this morning. What the hell were you celebrating anyway, or were you just trying to scare me off pretending to be a ghost?"

Leather thighs instantly thickened and the horse immediately obeyed its command to stop. The chest swelled and Kate shuddered at his quick intake of air. "What did ye say?" Fingers that had been gentle and kind now dug into her clothes with tension.

Kate glanced over her shoulder to see his wide eyes glaring into her. Vulnerable and unnerved by his change in attitude, she shivered bravely, "You heard."

Alex swung off the horse. Her balance wavered at the sudden movement, and she automatically gripped the saddle to steady herself. Dark eyes peered up at her, fear hovering behind. "Tell me again. What did ye see?" He leaned into her leg, holding both her and the horse in place.

"I saw you, forcing this poor animal to race across the moor." She stroked its mane in sympathy.

"Did ye see the face?" His expression stern and serious, Kate wanted to giggle at his charade. He was joking, wasn't he?

"As a matter of fact, no I didn't. But I know it was you. Were you wearing a mask?"

A cloud, thicker than the mist around them, had descended on Alex. He whirled around and she was certain he was going to walk off into the fog. "Dear God," he mumbled. "He's come back." Turning to face her, she saw amazement and a new respect in his face as well as hearing it in his voice. "And ye saw him?"

"Who? What are you trying to pull now?" This guy is a real actor, she decided, the sort of stuff from which academy performances are won.

"Tell me again what ye saw, please. Every detail, no matter how unusual."

The request was sincere and it shocked her. But she relayed waking early without mentioning the dream, glancing out the window to see the movement, the sounds of the horse, the rider's desperation, and the disappearance at the edge of the garden. Telling the whole story now, here, to the man whom she thought was guilty, and having him hang on her every word as though it were all a revelation to him, left goose bumps over her flesh. "I saw the hoof prints on the path," she concluded. It was her last hold on reality. "If it wasn't you, then who?"

After a sharp stabbing nod of resignation, Alex's chest heaved, and using a rush of damp air to fill his lungs, he sprang into the saddle, resuming the spot behind her. He nestled comfortably, shifting her in accordance, and she braced herself in position waiting for the horse's lumbering walk to begin.

"Well," she demanded again, this time to the horse's shaking mane. "Whom are you referring to?"

"His name is Dougal. Dougal MacTamhais."

"Oh? A friend of yours or a relative?"

After a short pause Alex answered, his voice low and humorless, denoting a hesitancy to continue the conversation. "Both."

A ripple of reins prompted the horse to move. The edge of the garden was now only a minute away, and Alex spoke no more.

## Chapter Six

An inexhaustible amount of tea was brewing in preparation for Kate's return from the bone-chilling damp of being lost on the moors. Mally, having stewed her concoction into an inky, sour blackness, was plugging in the kettle to make more when Kate came through the door.

"Katie," she squeaked, relief washing color back into her cheeks. "I was so worried. I knew you were out there, and when the fog rolled in, I didn't know who to ask, and if I went looking I'd end up getting lost and, oh, Katie." She grabbed her sister's hands giving a brisk nervous wrench. "You look terrible. What happened? Did Alexander find you?"

"Yes, Alex found me." Kate fished about at the back of a cupboard and found a half-full bottle of whiskey.

A broad smile crept over Mally's face. "Ah, 'Alex' now is it? Getting better acquainted, are you?"

"Don't you jump to any conclusions," she said, unscrewing the bottle top. "I know how your mind works."

"Well. What happened?"

Kate poured the whiskey into a shot glass and snapped it back. Then she poured another. Mally watched in utter disbelief. Kate wasn't a drinker, except for a glass of wine or two on holidays or special occasions, but nothing like this. "I found the route your ghost has been taking in his nightly jaunts." She wiped a drop of gold from her mouth with her shirtsleeve. "Prints were exceptionally real so that was it--mystery solved. Or so I thought. Followed the path awhile, but it's endless. Sat down by a bunch of rocks to rest my feet, fell asleep, and then the fog. I couldn't see the path so figured I'd best sit right where I was and wait."

"Wise decision. You could have been lost forever wandering around out there. So did you see the Highlander?"

"You're not listening, are you? The only Highlander I saw was Alex ... ander." Kate twisted her glass, hypnotized in thought. A fierce debate was being waged about whether to tell Mally that someone else shared the path, a someone by the name of Dougal MacTamhais. Swallowing another stinging gulp of whiskey, she decided it best to find out more information before Mally went wild in her supernatural assumptions. The history of Kirkland Hall must be a lengthy one. "What did you find out, anyway?" Kate asked. "Any success on the families who lived here?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I started with the churchyard. There's a small cemetery, no more than a couple of dozen stones, and most of them are Campbell and most are pre nineteen hundred. Anyway, I was poking about and this elderly gentleman stopped and leaned over the stonewall to ask if I was looking for anyone in particular. Must have thought I was ancestor searching. So I said I was curious about the hall and he told me that, as far as he knew, this place has been in the Campbell family for almost four hundred years." Mally worked her way into the kitchen and poured a cup of hot ink into



a mug. “‘Oh’, I said, ‘That must be how old the hall is then.’ He shook his head and said that for about a hundred years before that again it belonged to the MacTamhais clan. They were the ones who built it. So this hall is at least five hundred years old.”

Kate shivered. *Dougal. His name is Dougal MacTamhais.* Five hundred years....

“But,” Mally continued, sipping the tea cautiously, “he didn’t say much else. I asked him about ghosts and he just laughed and said that this was Scotland after all and there were more ghosts here than sheep--or something like that.” After spooning sugar into the mug she said, “I suppose MacTavish and MacTamhais are of the same clan, names being so similar and all. We should ask Alex. Maybe he knows.”

He knows, Kate thought. He could answer all Mally’s historical questions and then some. They’d make a perfect couple, those two.

“Maybe he also knows why the Campbell family have had the hall for so long, and maybe it explains why he, as a MacTavish, is so passionate about getting the place back.”

“Um, maybe so,” Kate mumbled.

Mally waited, that raised expectant look in her eyes. “Did you ask him?” She was beginning to sound impatient.

“About what?”

“About the room upstairs, or the story about the Highlander. He must know, Katie. Don’t tell me you didn’t ask!”

“I didn’t ask.”

A sharp whistle blew across the table as Mally slumped back into her chair. As though a light bulb came on, Mally’s face widened to an adolescent grin. “What did you talk about then?”

“Mally,” Kate sighed, finishing her drink, “I know where you’re going with this and don’t bother. Yes, he’s a nice looking guy and yes, he’s got a mysterious edge to him, but a resounding ‘no’ from me means just that. No. I came here to get away from men and relationships and all the baggage that goes with it.”

“He looked quite worried when I told him you were lost.”

Kate gave her throat the pleasure of a grunt. “He was worried about legalities. How would it look to have the co-inheritor suddenly go missing on the moors and him desperate to have the place to himself?”

“You’re too cynical. I’m on the outside looking in so I see things. He has a real soft spot for you.”

Kate smiled to herself. He has a certain tender spot, too. “Well,” Kate stated as a conclusion to the conversation, “If you’re so curious you’ll have to ask him yourself. As for me, my day is over. I’m going to have a hot bath and go to bed.”

\* \* \* \*

Kate attributed her sound sleep to the whiskey. Jet lag was over and she finally started a day feeling revitalized and ready for anything.

Mally was already thumping about in the kitchen, tidying up the dishes in the sink, when Kate came downstairs. “Coffee’s on,” she sang. “Pour yourself one and then I need to ask you something.”

Sunlight streamed into the tiny kitchen and inched into the living room. Adding to her optimism, Kate began planning a trip into the village to see the manner in which

the natives lived. She would buy some souvenirs and perhaps start a little research for her self.

By the time Mally settled at the table with a plate of toast and marmalade, her face was screwed with concern. "I didn't get around to telling you last night that I talked to Timothy Younger. Remember me telling you about the parapsychologist at the university?"

"How could I forget?" Kate smiled. "Someone from your planet. Nice for you."

"He sounds so ... interesting," she sighed with dreamy satisfaction. "Well, what I'm trying to say is that he's invited me to Edinburgh, as I had hoped he would, and I'd really like to go for a few days."

"Okay. So why do you look so worried?"

"I wasn't sure whether or not you'd be comfortable here by yourself." There was a mixture of concern and tease to her smirk. "I mean, alone with Alex."

"I think I can handle myself, sis. I'm a big girl now." Kate didn't want to run with her romantic ideas, certainly not this early in the morning. "When were you planning on going?"

"Apparently it's a three hour drive and taking into account me getting lost a couple of times, four. So I was thinking about going as soon as I straightened up. Is that all right? I mean, if you want me to stay I will."

If Kate was brutally honest with herself, the prospect of spending time alone did make her uncomfortable. However, she knew her sister had looked forward to meeting this professor, and she wasn't about to throw cold water on her plans just because a few silly stories were unnerving. "Don't be foolish," she scolded. "You go and take all the time you want. I'll get into the village and carry on with your research. I'll be fine."

"You sure?" Her blue eyes sparkled with gratitude. "I'll call often to make certain you're okay."

"Oh, for goodness sake! If there are any problems--and there won't be--I'll ask Mr. MacTavish."

Mally grinned. "Mr. MacTavish again, is it?"

"You're the one who needs to be careful," Kate teased, changing the subject.

"What if the professor turns out to be a pervert?"

"I can only wish," Mally laughed. "Thanks, sis. I really appreciate this."

Within the hour she had her case packed and was waving a gleeful goodbye.

Kate watched the car roll down the driveway, and as it disappeared she turned to stare up at the house that suddenly seemed even more foreboding than before. A flutter of cool air added to the chill of her nerves. "What have I done?" she asked. Wrapping her sweater around her shoulders she started for the house when the sound of tires crunching gravel made her whirl round. Expecting Mally had forgotten something, she was startled when the car and its two occupants pulled up near the stables. Both smiled in her direction and she was automatically drawn closer.

"Good morning to ye," came the jolly voice of a man unfolding himself out of the driver's seat.

"Good morning," Kate answered politely. She couldn't help but smile as the oversized company heaved twice before actually getting out.

In comparison the woman with him was slender and popped out of the car with the weightless grace of a dancer. Her long red hair swirled in locks as she opened the

back and started jostling cardboard boxes.

Puffing reddish gray whiskers from exertion, the man wheezed. "Not as young as I used to be." Taking a few steps towards Kate, he thrust out his pudgy hand and smiled, "Name's Douglas MacTavish, but call me Doug. Ye must be the lovely Katherine we've been hearing about."

Kate shook his hand. It was soft and clammy and his pleasing disposition was infectious. Not certain what he had heard, she stumbled her words. "Er, well. Yes. I'm Kate Daniels."

"That little workhorse over there is my wife, Cindy." The hazel eyes swept in the direction of a woman lifting a box almost as big as she was. Doug made no offer to help. "Don't suppose my brother is in, is he?"

"Oh," Kate said with little intelligence. "Of course. MacTavish. It's just you don't look the least bit alike."

"Aye, weel. Father was a bit of a lassie's man. Married three times. I'm the result of the first union. Alex the second. The third was barren, but not from his lack of trying."

"Spare the poor lass the graphic details," Cindy said. "I'm sure she could care less."

"Be careful with that, woman. Mind where ye step."

Cindy threw him a glare and frog-marched the bulging box to the stable door. "I can't lift anything of weight," Doug explained sadly. "Threw my back out a year ago and it's been a problem since. Not to worry with a wee woman that strong to help. Eighth wonder of the world, she is, in more ways than one."

"Sod off ye silly bugger," she laughed. Obviously Cindy was used to his good-humored teasing.

Doug studied Kate. "My little brother was right. Ye are quite a looker. Have ye been to our fair land before?"

"Ah, no, actually." What did he mean, 'quite a looker'? What sorts of things were being said behind her back? "This is our first visit. My sister is with me."

"Hear that, Cin!" Doug clasped his protruding belly as he laughed. "He's got two women here. Aye, weel. Alex always had been a bit of a lassie's lad. Got that from the old man I suspect."

"Please, Doug," Kate said calmly. "There's nothing going on between...."

"He needs a good woman," Doug interrupted. "Cin will tell ye the number of nights I sat up worrying about the lad. He disappeared completely for near enough ten years. No idea where he went. Drove me to drink with worry."

"As if ye need an excuse to drink," Cindy scolded, riffling another box out of the car. "Jist look at the color of his nose."

"Och. Never mind. He's home where he belongs now." Squinting approvingly at Kate he added, "He's thirty-eight, ye know. Soon past his sell-by date. Quite a catch is our Alex."

"That's nice, but I really...."

"Tried to get him to move in with Cin and I. Guess the kiddies put him off. We have three girls. Nearly all grown up now, sweet lasses." Doug's round chest swelled with pride. "Said he'd rather live here. Loves this old place. Almost as much as he hates it."

Cindy stopped on her way to the car to get one more box. Peering sympathetically at Kate she said, "He'll talk yer ear off, lovie. I'll be finished soon and we'll be oot of yer hair."

"Oh, that's fine," Kate replied. "Mally's gone to Edinburgh for a few days so I enjoy the company."

"Edinburgh? Why Edinburgh?" Doug sounded incensed.

"She's interested in their parapsychology department. Mally's a bit of a ghost buster."

Doug's small eyes widened suddenly before he broke into a boisterous laugh that rippled his whole body into convulsions. His red cheeks grew so flushed Kate was certain he'd explode on the spot. "Didna have to go to Edinburgh for that," he managed to spit out through gasping for breath. "She could stay right here and see her fill!"

Finished with her job Cindy joined her husband, laughing softly. "Aye," she agreed, glancing knowingly at the house. "Or so they say. But ye shouldna be filling the wee girl's head with fanciful stories. Scare her to death, ye will. And her brave enough to stay here alone."

A sweaty hand slapped Kate's shoulder. "She's no alone. Alex will protect her."

"I don't need protecting," Kate smiled through gritted teeth. Chauvinism certainly ran in the family, she thought.

"Ye need anything, ye give us a call," Cindy said. "Doug and I run a Bed and Breakfast just on the other side of Gillewne. Drop in anytime."

"Thank you. That's awfully nice of you."

"Come along, old man," Cindy said, heading for the car. "I've got work for ye to do."

"Aye," Doug sighed. "No rest for the wicked is there, my little slave driver."

"Jist get yer fat arse in the car." Turning to Kate she smiled, "Anytime. I meant it as well." She slipped into the car with ease and waited while her husband squeezed his bulk behind the steering wheel. The engine sputtered and groaned as if to complain about the weight it was required to carry. Before the grind of gears the window rolled down and Doug's freckled arm shot out, waving Kate over.

"I almost forgot," he said. "There's a letter for you from old James. Wrote it before he died."

"Wouldna written it after he died now would he?" his wife laughed, her red locks glistening in the light.

Ignoring her Doug said, "I left it in the wee apartment off the house, on the kitchen table. Did ye get it?"

"No," Kate was trying to remember if she had even seen a letter. Nothing in the wing looked personal or out of place, even a letter. "No, but I'll look again now that I know. Thank you."

The arm shot up to wave as the car chugged and spluttered out of the drive.

"So," she mumbled while waving her farewell. "A letter from Mr. Campbell for me." She glanced suspiciously at the stable doors and the boxes piled neatly outside. "I wonder why this is the first I've heard of it."

Forgetting about faceless ghosts and fanciful stories, Kate stormed off to the east wing. She'd search, but she had a niggling idea exactly who had the letter, and if she was correct in her assumptions, Mr. Lassie's Lad had some questions to answer.

\* \* \* \*

True enough, no letter to be found. Kate glared at the mess she'd eventually have to straighten up: overturned cushions, shelf drawers pulled and contents scattered, flipped rug. She even went so far as to crawl up the kitchen counters to reach onto top shelves, finding nothing more than a thin layer of dust.

Slapping the dirt from her hands, she scowled. Why didn't James Campbell give all related documents to the lawyer for safekeeping, or even mail the letter to her? It must surely explain why he had wanted to include her and Mally in his will and the curiosity was driving her frantic. Even worse was the anger bubbling up inside her that Alex was going to such pains to keep answers from her. Why had Doug been entrusted with the letter? He obviously didn't realize Alex's burning desire to keep her totally in the dark.

*He loves this old house. Almost as much as he hates it.* Whatever that meant.

Kate spread the curtains, leaning to catch a glimpse of the stables from the living room. The boxes were gone; broad doors were swinging gently in the breeze. Alex was there.

Change of tactics. It was certainly against her better judgment to be pleasant to the man, but this was war. In times of war sacrifices had to be made. She swallowed hard and mumbled verbal encouragement. "You can do this," she said mechanically. "Be polite and sweet and throw out a few questions as though you were simply mentioning the weather. Easy. No worries."

Smoothing down the front of her sweater she slipped on her shoes and strode casually across the courtyard.

The sound of clanking metal greeted her through the open door. Feigning a huge smile she hoped didn't appear to be too outrageous, she poked her head round the corner. The hammer of steel was followed by a loud grunt. "Move, ye damnable piece of rusty shite!" a voice from beneath the car shouted. Another slap of the hammer drowned out her knock on the door.

One of the cardboard boxes had been torn open. From where Kate hovered she could see car parts and gaped in amazement at how strong Cindy really was to have lugged it the distance she did. Adjusting to the dim light within, she saw the belly of the car well illuminated, the electric cord draped over the two oil stained pant legs that emerged from one side. After another short spurt of profanity, there was a crack, and in the resulting quiet Kate cleared her throat as loudly as she could.

The legs flinched. Alex rolled out from under the car, bringing the bare light bulb with him. He squinted at the door, the corners of his mouth turned in a questioning scowl. "Something wrong?" he asked, before getting up. He kept his black eyes on her while wiping oil and grease from his hands.

"No. Not at all. I just thought I'd pop out and say hello." She cleared the dry spot forming in her throat and attempted her most amicable smile. Even as a grubby mechanic he looked appealing. Brushing the lusty thought aside she continued, "I, ah, met your brother and his wife."

The rag flopped over his fingers smudging more oil than it removed. "Oh, aye," he said.

Kate leaned lazily on the doorframe. "Nice man. So unlike you. I would never have taken you for brothers." Not until the words left her mouth did she realize the

insinuating insult. Guess glib connotations were becoming a natural part of her conversations with him. She could hear Mally confirming theories of Freudian slips, which were subconsciously intentional. Rather than try to backpedal she glanced at the boxes and said, "Think you'll get it running?"

Alex folded his arms, biceps bulging from the short sleeves of his grubby torn T-shirt, and propped his backside against the car. A wry grin inched across his dark face. He hadn't blinked. "What game are ye playing now, Missy?"

He might as well have waved a red flag in her face. "What game am *I* playing? *Me*? You're the one playing games, Mister! And I'm getting sick of it." Her voice grew from a growl to a shriek. "And my name is Kate!"

Alex kept smiling inanely, showing no concern for her growing insanity.

Damn, she thought. So much for diplomacy and politeness. He certainly knew which buttons to push to get her dander up. Fingers curled, she held her breath and counted to twenty.

Alex turned and threw the rag into the corner while reaching for a can sitting on the hood. Tipping his chin, he gulped and wiped off the excess with the back of his hand. Then he settled onto the board to roll under the car again without further word, as though she was made of air.

"Excuse me!" she demanded.

"Certainly," he answered before wheeling out of sight.

"Oh no! No you don't! We need to talk and right now is as good a time as any."

An odd whirling noise from under the car was the only response.

Undaunted she continued, "I understand that Mr. Campbell left a letter addressed to me and I mean to have it."

A clank. Another sharp whirl.

"Mr. MacTavish! Why are you being so rude to me?" Kate could feel a heat flush into her cheeks so stinging that kernels of corn would burst in seconds.

When the board rolled quickly out again, Kate stepped back, thinking she had goaded him into an irritated response, but he continued to act as though he hadn't heard a word she said. He opened the hood, bent into the engine and wrenched out something that looked like a water hose.

In a flush of madness Kate flounced to the car. Inches away from him she could smell the mixture of oil and sweat wafting in the muggy atmosphere. "I'm not leaving until I get that letter."

The wrench in his hand shuddered to a stop and without lifting his head Alex stared up at her. Sighing heavily, he stood up straight, wiped his palms on the sides of his faded jeans, and pulled out a drawer containing an assortment of tools. A white envelope appeared, folded and marked with excess grime from sharing the squalid space.

Alex held the envelope to her, but when Kate moved to take it, he snatched it out of her reach. "Kiss me first," he said.

"What?" Stupefied by the request her chin dropped. "You're not serious?"

"I am. Small price to pay."

"I shouldn't have to pay for what's mine to begin with. Now give it over." She lunged, more from frustration than athletic ability, but missed completely and stumbled foolishly closer.

His hand swept down her arm with a gentle ease. His dark eyes grew dreamy, and

his voice became sultry. "Katie," he whispered. "You kissed me once. Will ye no do so again, now?"

Convinced the request was steeped in callousness as opposed to genuine attraction, she stiffened her resolve to stay strong. "I did not kiss you. You forced yourself on me." Her frustration was cracking into confusion. "What are you trying to do?" she pleaded, her voice abandoning her resolve. "One minute you're threatening me, the next you're mocking me. That is if you're paying the least bit of attention to me at all, and now you're ... what *are* you doing?"

Alex's gaze fell to the floor. "No questions, no lies." He passed the letter to her and as soon as she snapped it from him he turned the expanse of shoulder and started fiddling with a tool on the makeshift counter.

"Great," she said. "I have a thousand questions I need answered and by that comment I guess you'll be feeding me a pack of lies. Just great."

The shoulders shivered gently, but Alex said nothing in return.

"Too bad," she added as she approached the daylight. "I think we could have gotten along well if you'd only tried to be civil. And you can stop your games. I have every intention of coming to some agreement with you about this place. Do you hear me, you self-centered, egotistical charmer? Kirkland Hall is yours. It always has been. You and this Dougal can live happily ever after. I want no part of it." Exasperation finally drained, she headed for the door. "You know where I am if you want to talk."

## Chapter Seven

Clutching the envelope tightly in her hand, Kate made her way directly through the foyer and into the garden. She left the door slightly ajar. Deep in her heart she hoped that Alex would shake off his morose self-exile and join her. She sighed deeply after finding the stone bench, to think this was a perfectly lovely afternoon and the two of them could be chatting amicably about the hall and the history and the weather. He was, after all, captivating in a rugged, distant, forbidding way.

She watched the hall and particularly the empty door and when nothing more than a bird flittered, she turned to the envelope with her name smeared across the front.

The spider web handwriting was immaculate: gently slanted, gracefully looped and in spots rickety, the telltale sign the author suffered trembling fingers or poor eyesight or even both. Kate read her name several times before carefully tearing the end. At least it was still sealed. She could credit Alex with respecting the note's privacy.

A brilliant white reflected from the paper; Kate shifted to the end of the bench, holding it in a blotch of shade and read:

*Dear Katherine and Mallory Daniels,*

*Now that you are reading my letter, I shall assume your curiosity won the battle & you are enjoying the passion of my old age: Kirkland Hall. I am pleased! The walls echo the lives of many an ancestor, most of them content but few, like myself, lucky enough to find love. Or keep it close.*

*What, you may ask appropriately so, does any of this have to do with either of you? As perhaps you know, Your father & I were kindred spirits during a time when the world was filled with madness; Your father had a sanity that carried me successfully through an insanity. I can honestly say he not only saved my life, but my mind, my pride, & my belief that there can be peace from chaos. Eternally grateful. These words are all I know to explain how I feel.*

*Old men become very philosophical when Death lifts his crooked knuckles and taps on the windowsill, His carriage door open & ready. Before I let Him aid my step therein, I have one wish, to share my home with you both. I had no wife, nor children; the Hall deemed it so. But seeing that your father was like a brother, you are the closest I have to family, excluding Ailigean, or Alexander, as you no doubt know him. He is the only son I will ever have.*

*Do as you wish with your share; it will all be beyond me by the time you read this. I trust that you and Ailigean will come to an agreement, perhaps between minds and hearts filled with the passions of life you may fulfill the emptiness of the lost soul within and rid this precious place of the cloak of sadness & superstition. Centuries of war, even waged with oneself, is too much for one man to bear. I pray I would never suffer Fate's hand that way.*

*I am sorry I never met you. Your father's letters were filled with pride & admiration for you both; I often wept in my jealousy. But may God in His goodness grant you peace and happiness.*



*Sincerely yours, James Stuart Campbell*

Kate smoothed the gentle streak from her cheeks. Overcome with the old man's unfailing love for his home and the never forgotten bond with her father, she felt touched with a whole new appreciation and understanding of how one building could become a symbol of honor and the depth the roots of one life could reach. Bricks, wood, stone--regardless of the material from which it was constructed, the most important element was the life within. Like the body of a man, the temple for the soul, this place, Kirkland Hall, clung to what breath it could; lose the soul, the body crumbles, as would the building.

No wonder it reached to her, whispered for one last chance, one final hope for redemption. She had no idea what to do or say or what could possibly happen next. All she was certain of was that by being remembered in the will she had become an intricate part of this world--she ... and Ailigean, Alexander.

Kate folded the letter, and held it to her breast with religious reverence. "Thank you, Mr. Campbell," she whispered. "For you and for Father, we shall do our best."

Empowered with a whole new perspective, Kate no longer wrestled with uncertainties of a malignant evil lurking within the house. Her fear, in short, had been dismissed. She had James Campbell to thank. Facing the house, she watched the window of the mysterious bedroom on the second floor. The hall's heart was beating within those walls and whatever she was meant to accomplish started there.

Nothing had been altered from her previous visit. The quilts were still rumpled, the book rested, overturned, on the side cabinet, the candles, tapestries, all ensconced in their proper places. Not wishing to disrupt the drumming silence, Kate tiptoed to the window seat and sat, the very place she had been when she had heard the gentle whisper.

Desperate, frightened, pleading--it had called her by name. Not her name, yet, at the same time it was. The voice, one that had been silent, called out to her. And her alone. She had heard. The name echoed through her mind and her dreams. Katrina. Katherine. He had called to her; tortured in the thought she had forgotten.

Forgotten. Forgotten his name, forgotten his promise, forgotten his love. Undying love. Unfulfilled hope. When love dies, hope, too, withers and fades. But his love was not dead. It lived and breathed within this room. There was still hope. And that hope had a name. Katherine. Katrina.

"I have not forgotten," she said softly. The walls seemed to lean closer as though straining, listening intently to every word. "I have simply misplaced."

The air filtered through a huge sponge enveloping Kate in a muggy stickiness. Its heaviness rapped her eardrums with pounding silence, heart-hammering release against her breast. Eyes closed, she let all thought wash from her mind, concentrating only on the beating in her chest. And in the cottony whiteness behind closed lids, through the saturating mist of a place she knew nothing of, wrapped within the serenity of nonexistence, he touched her.

She drew a short gasp as a wave of ecstasy rippled throughout her body, the fervor washing quickly into her being. Then grief. A punishing, excruciating, piercing grief. "No," she moaned. "Please, don't."

As though submerged beneath the water, Kate tried to keep her lungs from surging for air. Through the murky depths a hand reached out, harrowed, lost, confused. It was fading back into the distance blackness. And she could not reach it.

With a violent surge of air filling her lungs, Kate's eyes snapped open.

Again, the room faced her, unchanged. Except for the odd sensation of belief--and hope--through incredible odds.

Kate stood with unflinching determination, filled with the peace only hope can give. "I don't know how," she said to the ears she was certain still listened, "but I will set you free. I promise."

\* \* \* \*

Kate put off her trip to the village for another day. She would have to walk the mile or so and dark clouds had bubbled up threatening storm. Knowing through experience how unpredictable the Scottish weather could be, Kate busied herself, cleaning the mess she had angrily made while looking for the letter. Making a sandwich and a cup of tea she settled on the couch to reread the sentimental words of an old man who pulled ceaselessly her heartstrings. How she wished she had had the opportunity to meet him. If she had only known of the wartime friendship, she could have brought father here for a holiday. But then, she lamented, perhaps he had his own reasons for not coming back. She'd never know. Wrapping the duvet over her legs, she listened to the patter of raindrops on the window, congratulating her wisdom for remaining inside. She was beginning to doze when the phone beside her chirped twice.

"Katie," Mally shrieked through a noisy line. "Are you there?"

"Yes. It's a bad connection. Where are you?"

"Outer Siberia by the static on this phone! I'll make this quick. Safe and sound, no problems, and I've met Timothy."

Oh-oh, Kate grinned. Not Dr. Younger. But 'Timothy'. This conversation, as disconnected as it was, screamed volumes.

"Everything okay with you?" Mally yelled.

"Yes, fine. Look, enjoy yourself. Give me a call tomorrow morning and maybe the line will be clearer then."

"Okay. Ta-rah for now."

Kate stared at the phone. 'Ta-rah'? Into the local lingo already. But that was Mally, extroverted, vivacious, the center of attention of every party. And if she set her sights on this poor man, doctor or no, he wouldn't stand a chance.

Happiness for her sister was edged in disappointment for herself. If Mally had a flaming crush on this man she would want to stay in the city as long as possible, which meant Kate would have to endure loneliness here. She brushed aside the thin curtains. A soft yellow glow leaked from one window in the stables. If only he had been a little more receptive, they could be enjoying a bottle of wine, together. If only she had been a little more sensitive, maybe her careless words wouldn't have insulted his pride, if that was indeed her crime. Odd fellow, this Ailigean. Held an important place in old man Campbell's existence, the son he never had, but so quiet and distant. 'Still waters run deep,' was the overworked cliché. However, it was certainly appropriate in this instance.

Kate's last conscious thought before drifting off was that tomorrow she would make more of an attempt to talk with him, brush away his taunts, and penetrate that thick skin he used as a front. And if he asked her to kiss him, maybe she would.

*"Oh," she sighed in acknowledgment. "I'm dreaming. I can see the dream, I know I'm in this twilight place." This was all familiar. She had been here, before, and welcomed the eroticism of its presence.*

*The bed. The curtains around it were pulled and she was inside, sleeping,*

*protected, warm, with him. As long as he was here she would be safe. From who? Who would try to hurt her? Steal her away, rip out her very heart?*

*But no. He had risen, preparing to go. Please, stay. She had an overwhelming premonition of danger, loss, death.*

*The boar's head, carved, above, nodded agreement. Why could he not hear their plea?*

*Then hysteria. Screams. Her screams. Hands were pulling her away. Pain in her gut. Movement. Terror.*

*Snow. Scarlet pools of blood seeping through the white, covering everything. A sword. Dear God, no! His throat torn open, eyes wide to her, fading, dimming. Not true. Will it to go away!*

*The contraction wrenched in her stomach. Too early. Too soon. But the contractions continued. Wrenching in pain she buckled forward. The baby. His child. All she had left of him.*

*Dougal! My love! Don't let go. Don't leave me!*

*Dougal!*

The name was on Kate's lips when she woke. She heard her own voice resonate through the room and ebb as she opened her eyes. Shaking the paralysis of not only the dream but also its ensuing terror, her mind rocked with a real horror--the smell of smoke. And it was billowing into the east wing from the foyer.

Kate was never certain where her paranoia of fire had stemmed. She just knew her suffering was acute and untreatable. Mally had tried, subjecting her to a battery of psychological tests in an attempt to pinpoint the initial trauma in hopes of exorcising the demon completely. But all attempts failed. She was terror-stricken with simply the thought of uncontrolled flames lapping around her, and the visual had crept into many an exploding nightmare. She was resigned that it was the torment she was destined to carry. Some feared heights, some enclosed spaces, or spiders. With Kate it was fire.

Without hesitation or argument or second thoughts, Kate whirled through the stifling air she believed to come from the foyer and raced across the courtyard, barely sensing the sheets of rain bombarding her face and hair, and threw herself against the stable doors.

"Alex! Alex!" she shrieked, pounding her fists into the heavy oak. "Fire! Alex! Wake up!"

The yellow light stabbed the darkness around the window and within seconds the huge door swung open. A half-awake but concerned face peered down at her.

"Smoke," she panted, rain dripping down her neck, crawling cold fingers under her blouse. "Come quickly. The hall's on fire!"

Alex jerked his hand to one side to grab his jacket but was bursting into the foyer before even draping it over his shoulders. Kate scurried behind and nearly smashed into him, he had stopped so abruptly. Wiping the rain from her face, she blinked several times, facing dark eyes and furrowed brow of utter disbelief.

There was no trace of smoke anywhere.

"But," she mumbled, her heart still pattering to the recent bout of psychosis, "I smelled smoke. I'm certain of it."

Alex wordlessly bounded up the stairs and Kate could hear the floorboards squeak gently with the strain of his weight as he checked every room. And as the footsteps

intensified, denoting his check complete, Kate flushed with the realization there had been no fire, no smoke and all she had accomplished was proving she was neurotic and pathetic.

Alex drifted down the stairs, head swinging from side to side, continuing to check that no demon lurked quietly behind a wall or under a board. Motionless, Kate braced what was left of her pride for the expected reprimand, a cruel remark at the very least. When she found the courage to look up into his face she saw sympathetic apprehension stare back.

An exchange of empathy passed between them.

Overwrought, wet, and miserable, Kate covered her face with clammy palms, and gulped back an emotional onslaught. And the last thing she expected happened. Thick arms wrapped around her trembling shoulders, pressing her tearstained cheek into the folds of his shirt. "It's okay," he whispered into her hair. "Ye did the right thing coming to get me." His warm hand, huge and all encompassing, stroked her back in condolence. As she regained composure, he tightened his embrace and said, "Come on. Let's get a drink and ye can tell me what happened."

Kate nodded, digging the heel of her hand into her cheeks to wipe away the embarrassment. "I'm s-sorry," she stuttered. "I just don't understand this place or why it makes me feel this way."

He guided her into the living room, and turned on the lamp as she curled on the couch. Throwing a tea towel for her to dry off, he then rumbled about finding another bottle of whiskey.

"I can't believe I missed that one," she attempted to joke, the pangs of humiliation slowly diminishing, thanks to his uncharacteristically kind demeanor.

"There's a false back in one of the bottom cupboards," Alex explained, pouring them both a drink. "Jimmy kept a secret stash in there." She took the glass and he placed the bottle on the table within easy reach. "He was no supposed to drink, ye see, but was no about to let a doctor change the habit of a lifetime." He held his glass in salute and she welcomed the drink. Her nerves were quieting. "Ye all right now then?"

She shivered a nod.

"Put yer glass down a moment," he said. "Now lift yer arms. Ye need to get this wet shirt off."

Kate winced at the thought of exposing flesh, but he had her arms up and the wet shirt pulled off before she could argue. Intentions honorable, she snuggled in the warmth of the duvet being tucked around her body. And when he motioned for her to rest against his chest, her cheek was drawn to this deliciously familiar spot with enthusiasm. He passed her the drink, and she tipped up to finish it as though accepting a spoonful of cold-medicine.

"Another?" he asked, but she declined.

Sipping his own drink, his free hand stroked her hair as she cuddled against his body. The lavishness of his touch soothed away the adrenaline-wracked nerves that had made her shake so badly. His was a calming caress; he strummed more than rubbed, engulfing her in a magical tranquility. Within the circle of his arms she knew she was safe. No nightmare, real or imagined, could penetrate this shield.

"I did smell smoke." Her reiteration sounded pale and weak.

"I know." His heart thumped steady and strong in her ear.

“How could you know? Has this happened before?”

The palm continued sweeping. “Aye. It has.”

“You’ve smelled the smoke? I mean, it was real?”

“I’ve smelled it, aye, but I dinna think it’s real.” He offered no further explanation.

“Alex?”

“Um.”

“I’ve had dreams, horrible and beautiful and both. The emotion in them is so intense. Emotions that belong to someone else. Do you know what I mean?”

“Aye. I have had them, too.” The beat quickened slightly.

The serenity lured her into continuing. “Dougal?” she whispered.

Alex swallowed. “Aye, Dougal.”

“And the woman he loved?”

“Katrina.”

Kate curled her fingers into Alex’s shoulder and glanced nervously through the archway into the ancient home’s dark foyer. Katrina. The voice. Smoke that wasn’t ‘real’. Wrinkles in time. “Do you believe they’re still here?” she asked, half expecting something to materialize from the shadows.

“Aye, I do. But they canna find each other. Neither can rest.”

Questions were flooding into her mind, racing to be the first to fall forward. Kate shifted to face Alex and in so doing drew close to soft olive skin. The attempt to pull away was intercepted; voluptuous lips parted, dusky eyes fell on her. “Will ye no kiss me now?” he purred.

“Yes, Ailigean. I will.”

His dark eyes widened. He smiled briefly, the first genuine smile he had shared, and the result was an enchanting illumination of the most handsome face she had ever seen. And when she inched her fingertips into his hair, he sank to greet the acknowledgment, plunging his mouth to hers, squeezing her whole body into flexing muscle.

He fluttered his tongue like butterfly wings on the inside of her mouth, and she couldn’t stop the clipped moan that escaped, exposing the immense pleasure that constricted her throat. Grabbing a handful of heavy hair she pulled him closer, deeper, hypnotized by sensuality. No kiss had stirred her like this. Her whole body arched to greet his every gesture.

Alex framed her face with his hands, easing her slowly away while dancing short teasing kisses on her lips and chin. She barely realized he was pushing her back until her flushed cheek was cupped against the velvet hollow of a pulsating neck. To stop seemed to pain him. The hand that returned to her side gripped more tightly, his pulse thumped rapidly behind a chest which heaved. And when he bent to bury his forehead between the edge of the duvet and her shoulder, she was certain he uttered a moan, vibrating like a cat’s purr, deep within his vocal cords.

Kate sensed a deep pain within his heart. The kiss had told her he was a man who struggled to keep that agony covered, by silence, and solitude, and anger. And he was tired. The burden, whatever it consisted of, was growing too heavy and he was falling beneath the weight, without courage to ask for the help he needed. The softness in his lips told her he didn’t just want anyone; he had to wait until there was the right one, who

would recognize the weight and then offer to take it away. That's why he wanted her to kiss him. It was a confirmation.

His burden had lifted, ever so slightly, and the relief had begun.

Kate had not been the only one frightened that night.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and he clung to her in return. Saying nothing yet sharing gratitude, his lips moved to her neck and ear and hair and she rested against him, like a treasured rag doll.

Neither did she speak. The kiss was hers, the conversation would be his. The box was open and she had had a glimpse of the writhing contents, but only he could empty it.

A slow mechanical swaying lulled her eyes to close and her mind to drift and before she finally fell into a warm comfortable sleep, she heard him speak her name in Gaelic. "Ceitag. Dear Ceitag."

## Chapter Eight

Kate woke, disoriented and with a crick in her neck. Why was she on the couch? Carefully twisting to avoid aggravating the burning in her muscle, she saw the bottle on the table beside two glasses and the memory flooded back. Alex.

In the morning light the thoughts of ghosts seemed silly. But the sweetness of his kiss and the tender moment they had shared was far from being foolish. The act had reached deeply into her heart and before getting up she luxuriated in the moment that felt as though it had just occurred.

Although he had crept away while she slept, he was still with her. His scent was on her face and around her neck, his taste lingered on her lips and she smiled when she found a wavy long hair on the duvet.

Leaning out the window, she focused on the stables. Mist hung over the treetops and around the building, but the sun was successful in breaking the hold. A warm summer day had begun.

But the day wasn't half as glorious as her mood.

Kate ran a bath, took extra care styling her hair and make up, tucked a flowered T-shirt into her jeans, and inspected the results in the mirror. Then she bustled about the kitchen, almost dancing in rhythm to the cheerful music from a local radio station. She was just finishing her second cup of coffee when the phone chirped.

"Hi-ya, sis." Mally didn't sound quite as perky as during her last call but the line was static free. "Survived the night, then?"

"Certainly," Kate remarked. She wasn't about to get into graphic details so diverted the topic. "You don't sound so good, though."

"We went to a pub," Mally explained. "I think maybe I overdid it a tad. Have a bit of a headache this morning." An extremely deep male voice rumbled in the background.

"Oh? Just your head aching?" she teased.

"You have a dirty mind, too, don't you?" Obviously Mally enjoyed the tease but didn't offer any other gossip. Still, she hadn't answered the question.

"So what are your plans for today?"

"Well," Mally offered, "I'm going with Timothy to the university. He's giving a lecture on the prophetic ability of the dreaming mind."

Kate's brow lifted. "That sounds interesting." She wouldn't have thought so a week ago, but the dreams she had been experiencing the last couple of nights changed her attitude significantly. However, dreams were the last thing she wanted to think about this morning. "What's this Timothy like?"

"Yummy." Then she giggled.

"Oh, Mally," Kate sighed. "I'm too late to have that long sisterly talk with you, aren't I?"

"As if *you* could tell me anything!"

True, Kate thought. Shifting the phone to the other hand she asked, "Plan on

staying there awhile then, do you?"

"If that's okay. Besides, you need time to get better acquainted with Alexander."

"What makes you think I want to?"

"Yeah, right." There was an expectant pause but Kate wasn't about to satisfy her prodding. "I best be going. I'll call you this evening."

"Have fun."

"Goes without saying." Before she hung up there was another giggle.

Kate shook her head and felt a twang of sympathy for this Timothy Younger. If the man was half the psychic Mally thought him to be, he probably had her all figured out by now anyway. Kate glanced out into the hall. Good grief. Surrounded by ghosts, voices, dreams, she couldn't even get away from it all with a short conversation with her sister. It was all becoming a little too surreal.

Then the memory of Alex's kiss floated through her mind. That had been real. Very real. Unconsciously she lifted fingertips to her lips. Fleeting as it had been, he had demonstrated that there was a heart beating beneath his hardened breast. Obviously the hostility towards her was a charade.

Or was it? A warning bell tinkled in the back of her mind. What if he was up to something? A cruel joke, leading her on with no intention of being kind, like the last man she had the misfortune of getting involved with. But no. She was certain Alex's kiss was heartfelt, genuine, tinged with need. She wasn't crazy. Something happened between them. There was definitely a connection. What had Campbell called that type of connection in his poetic letter--'a kindred spirit'?

Maybe she was taking too many liberties with her assumptions.

Suddenly she envied Mally. Throw discretion to the wind, enjoy the minute and have fun. Was Kate meant to live as the opposite, erring on the side of caution to the point of total boredom?

A rumble and a bang, like a shotgun going off, broke her train of thought. She dashed to the window to see what was going on.

She was in time to see Alex viciously kick the tire on his car that now settled in a cloud of gray smoke outside the stable doors. She smiled to think what he was saying. His snarling lips meant it wasn't a prayer of thanks. At least he managed to get it into the yard so there must have been some optimism that the vehicle was on the verge of functioning.

Kate pulled on her sweater and crossed the courtyard. "Any hope?" she laughed thinking about the religious analogy she had made from his angered expression. "Or has it given up the ghost?"

He was folding back the hood. "She's being stubborn," he snarled into the car. "Just like a female." His eyes rolled to her. "No insult intended."

"No, of course not." Yesterday the comment would have boiled her blood. Now she was simply amused. Amazing the effect one kiss could have. "Why do men always consider cars to be female?"

"Because they're a thing of beauty," he replied in all seriousness, glancing around the inside to find the problem. "And the older they get the more they complain when ye want to ride them." He rested his elbows on the edge, twiddling his fingers in thought.

"Less than flattering comparison," Kate ventured, trying not to smile.

"Here," he said, twisting a greasy valve. "Make yourself useful and try the



ignition.”

“Certainly, mon commandant,” she quipped and slid into the leather seat. The dash glistened with what she thought plastic imitation, but upon closer examination saw it was oak. “Very nice,” she said. “What kind of car is this?”

“A seventy seven Morgan,” he said, a hint of pride buried in the frustration. “Okay, try her now.”

Kate switched the ignition and gently pressed her toe on the gas pedal. It whirled, spluttered, whirled again and choked off in a coughing fit.

“Ye piece of shite,” he scowled before kicking the side with a thump.

Kate leaned past the windscreen. “Is that how you talk to all women you can’t ride?”

Alex smiled, the curl of lips softening his tensed cheeks. “Aye. Well, this one made a promise to me and I aim to hold her to it.” His head and shoulders disappeared into the long front. The car rocked slightly with whatever he was doing. “Try her again,” he demanded, his voice muffled by the metal barrier.

Kate gingerly turned the key. It whirled, thought about flagging, but caught.

“Good girl,” Alex coaxed. “Keep going. That’s it.” He stood to one side, anxiously watching the engine.

Kate had never been jealous of a car before, but this was a trip awash with firsts. But as the other woman she might reap the benefits of Alex’s success. His mood was elevated, although characteristically guarded.

Gently folding the hood he wiped a smudge from the red paint with his elbow and glowed with pride. “I had faith in the ol’ girl. Aye, she’s done me proud.”

“Great,” Kate said, flipping the handle to get out. “I’m happy for both of you.”

“Do ye wanna drive her?” Realizing the generosity of the offer Alex screwed his brow and added, “I mean, around the yard. I’m no certain if she’ll keep running.”

“That’s fine,” Kate declined the offer. “I wouldn’t want to be the one to come between such a beautiful relationship.”

He held the door for her to climb out. Accidentally brushing the back of his hand she flushed, shrinking slightly at the sudden memory of the shared intimacy the night before. By the color rising against his swarthy skin, he was having similar thoughts. It seemed the pompous man she had thought him at first impression was missing; his bout of adolescent shyness was almost comical.

Kate startled somewhat when he took her wrist, wrapping his long slender fingers easily around the bone. His thumb stroked the fine hairs that had woken at his touch. Turning inquisitive eyes to her, he said, “Seeing ye have no been out to see much of the country, I was wondering if ye’d accompany me this afternoon.”

“In this?” Her tone was sarcastic.

Alex’s shoulders stiffened and his dark eyes flashed from insult. “Aye,” he answered defensively, dropping her wrist. “Or is a Morgan no good enough for some?”

“Good grief! Rather quick with your assumptions, aren’t you? You just got finished telling me it might not make it round the driveway and now you’re suggesting a drive in the country. Make up your mind, and don’t get uppity with me.” Despite being thoroughly amused she tried to sound incensed.

Dismissing the faux pas he said, “I just thought ye might enjoy the scenery.”

“I would,” she stated with conviction. “Almost as much as I would enjoy the

company.”

The blush deepened. He swallowed hard. “Aye. Right. Well, I’ll need to get cleaned up first, so say an hour. I’ll collect ye.”

“I shall be ready for collecting.”

Kate gave her smile permission to break once her back was turned and she was headed for the house. And she was quite aware he was watching her go. No longer on the defensive she was very much the one in control, and very much looking forward to spending the afternoon sightseeing in a Morgan.

\* \* \* \*

“Any place special ye would like to visit, or do ye trust my discretion?”

“I trust you,” Kate answered. Strapped comfortably in the leather bucket seat, she stared at her host with awe. Dark curls feathered over the collar of his jacket, olive skin disappearing beneath the V-neck of a white cotton sweater. I trust you, she smiled to herself. It’s me I don’t trust.

Shifting gears with care, he told the car to ‘behave herself’, and they pulled from the drive.

Not a cloud in the blue sky, the sun beat onto her shoulders. The wind tickled through Kate’s hair, making it twist and dance all over her head. A sense of freedom, carelessness and wonder erupted into a satisfied sigh. A taste of the good life. Yes, she thought. I could get used to this.

Alex slowed to a crawl driving through Gillewne. The streets were narrow and on some corners the stone houses perched perilously close to the traffic. Some front doors opened directly onto the street. Medieval designs. That world hadn’t had the foresight to predict the hustle of automobiles and design streets accordingly hundreds of years ago. Scotland seemed a compromise in architecture, accommodating the present with regret. Still, it retained its charm. There was nothing quite like this in the colonies.

Every second person throughout the village stopped to either admire Alex’s car or wave recognition or both. And ‘lassie’s-lad’ was an understatement. Every female from eight to eighty wanted to attract his attention. His grin was smug, and the return gestures of acknowledgement were a casual flip of fingers from the top of the wheel. Perhaps it wasn’t the narrow street that slowed their progress through the village after all.

Gillewne stopped on one side of a stone fence, the countryside started on the other. Like a prison wall, the village had been refused permission to leave. Like a lifetime occupant, it didn’t want to anyway.

Alex eased the wheel in a slow turn towards a rather primitive looking road that enveloped them with the vastness of the moor. Clearly only wide enough for one car, Kate hoped, for safety’s sake, it was one way. But when she read a sign that ordered the driver to sound the horn before attempting an obscure bend, her jaw dropped.

Lack of ditches gave the illusion of extra width but not enough to comfort Kate’s growing concern. At one particularly flat lay-by Alex pulled the car over. Letting it idle he twisted to Kate and smiled. “I hope ye dinna think Scotland is nothing but moor.” He pointed to the horizon in front of them. “That mountain o’er there is called Bidean nam Bian, near Glencoe. Have ye heard of it?”

High school history had included sweeping generalizations of British history and although the name triggered familiarity Kate had to confess ignorance. This seemed fine as her guide lapsed into his historical recitation.

“Clans havena the reputation of getting along well. The Scots would argue over the color of a loch, give them half a chance. Too many arguments ended with the sword, and even then little was solved. In Glencoe the Campbells massacred forty MacDonalds on a winter’s morning in 1692.”

Kate visualized the blood in the snow, her recent dream still hauntingly vivid. Shaking the image away, she asked, “Why?”

“The MacDonalds refused to give their allegiance to William III and to foreswear the Jacobite cause by the time appointed by the government. Touchy time that, politically speaking. MacIan, the MacDonald clan chief, was killed, but his two sons ran off into those mountains with a handful of others. The two clans never did get along well to begin with and there was certainly no love lost after that. Clan aggression is part of our history, as well, Ceitag.”

“How do you mean?” she asked, immersed in his lesson.

“The MacTamhais clan had allegiance with the Campbells. Dougal was clan chief for the last ten years before his death in 1602. His first marriage was arranged--to a Campbell. She died in childbirth and then he sought out the wee lassie he loved, Katrina MacDaniells. The MacDaniells were less than thrilled with the union, seeing they were in league with the MacDonalds who in turn hated the Campbells and anyone associated with them.” Alex paused, his shoulders heaved with a sigh. “Her brother, Bruce MacDaniells, was bent on revenge and from all records was an expert with a blade, or so he bragged himself. He killed Dougal and stole her back to her family. Started another clan war.”

“How does this relate to me?”

Alex shifted the gear and the car rolled gently forward. “Ye’re a Daniels, a direct descendant of Katrina’s child. So ye see, if I, being a MacTavish, were to marry ye, ours would be a forbidden union.” He winked. “That is, if we had lived here five hundred years ago.”

Dismissing the romantic insinuation, Kate was more enticed by her line of descent. “How do you know I’m a direct descendant? That’s how many generations?”

“There’s a pub near here, Ceitag. Care for a drink?”

Kate barely heard him. “Lovers ... they were torn apart in life and have been searching for each other ever since. That’s what you said, wasn’t it? And I’m a direct descendant?”

“We could have lunch, too.”

“MacDaniells and Daniels. Wait a minute. Didn’t you say the Daniel’s women had a questionable reputation? Was that section of your research personal?”

Alex laughed, a flash of white teeth proving the pleasure he was deriving from her frenzied questioning. “Ye really know how to take one bit of information and run with it, don’t ye?”

“But I want answers!” she demanded, hair flapping into her eyes with the sudden gusts. “And you’re not really helping.”

“Most answers I dinna have. And where there’s no written documentation ye have to fill in the blanks.”

“The ghosts have no birth certificates?”

“None that I can find. Do ye still believe the hall is haunted?” He glanced at her more often than the road, which continued to narrow.

“Do you?”

Lifting one finger from the wheel he pointed to a small hill in the distance, one stone building clinging to it, looking like an unwanted blemish on the moor’s cheek. “There’s the pub. Called, ‘The Bonny Prince’.” He smiled. “Now surely ye have heard of that piece of Highland history?”

Culloden--the defeat of the Highland clans by the English and their lowland Scot allies. “Yes, I’ve read about it. Were the MacTavish there, too?”

“Aye, some. The clan chief was imprisoned at the time, however, so the few who got organized went to fight with the Macintosh and the Fraser clans.”

Names, dates, spider web connections were buzzing in Kate’s mind. She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m getting a headache from all this,” she complained.

“Enough history then,” Alex said.

The moor was quickly disappearing behind them, the pub looming closer and larger. From a distance the building seemed to be a solitary structure. But beyond the rose gardens, the road dipped straight down into a town that rested on the edge of a sparkling sea. The Bonny Prince stood sentinel at the top of this hidden kingdom.

Alex swung the long hood of the car into an impossibly small space and snapped the break on. His arm stretched across Kate’s shoulder, and for an instant she was certain he would lean over and kiss her, and then was disappointed when he didn’t.

“At least this pub has a decent car-park,” he said. “If ye want to see the town after lunch we’ll walk down, if ye think ye can manage.”

“I think I could manage.” Kate rolled her eyes. Just how much of a weakling did he think she was?

As pleasant and charming as the interior was, with its low ceilings and broad black beams and shelves of dusty ornaments, the lure of the sunshine, the scent of roses and the spectacular view of the town below and the twinkling water beyond pulled Kate into the patio like a magnet. She secured a spot against the stone wall to drink in the breathtaking view.

“What would ye like?” Alex asked, slipping off his jacket and draping it over the chair beside her.

After a small debate she decided to have a pint of ale. Whiskey, the beverage of choice with many a local, seemed inappropriately strong for afternoon refreshment.

Kate gaped at the size of the glass he plunked on the table in front of her. A pint was indeed just that--a pint. “I ordered us the ploughman’s lunch,” Alex said. “Hope that’s all right.”

She nodded, still mesmerized with the view. Now that the arm inched over the back of her chair, her attention refocused to her date.

“This was a lovely idea,” she said. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“Och. Least I could do.” His thumb wiped away the tiny drops forming on his glass. “Seeing that I was less than hospitable when ye first got here.”

“Now that you mention it, what *was* all that about, anyway?”

His chin tipped towards his chest and shoulders heaved with a heavy sigh. “I dinna know what to expect.” His voice was low and almost apologetic.

She waited for further explanation but he didn’t offer more. She didn’t want the subject to drop.

“Didn’t Mr. Campbell tell you what he planned in his will?”

Alex shook his head. A wave of dark hair twisted around the smooth skin of his neck. "Not really. I knew about ye, but it was a bit of a shock to find out the details."

"And you thought the whole estate would be left to you?"

"Aye. Took too much for granted then, didn't I? But I guess he had his reasons, sly ol' devil that he was."

"The letter he left said it was partly gratitude for the friendship he had with my father during the war."

Alex nodded and sipped his beer. "I dinna keep the letter from ye deliberately. I forgot about it till ye stormed in and demanded to see it."

Kate saw he was telling the truth. The hard edges of the man she first met were gone. The Alex beside her was a whole different person. The potential to be friends was there after all. "Tell me about him," she asked.

"Jimmy? Oh, rather eccentric. Didna go out much. Spent most of his time in the house, writing, and reading. After the stroke he needed a lot of care. He shared his home with me and I did what I could to help him."

"Were you related?"

Alex drifted in meditative thought and then said, "No. But he was a man who remembered favors, whether deserved or no."

Kate ached to know more but Alex's gaze was distant. It wasn't her business. But if he wanted to share more, she would gladly listen.

"Your brother is quite a character," she said changing the topic.

"Doug? Oh, aye. That he is."

"He worries about you. Seems to think..." her voice trailed, having second thoughts about mentioning his suggestion that Alex needed a good woman.

One thick eyebrow lifted to her. "That I need to settle down." Alex finished her unspoken words. "I know. He's told me often enough."

"Why haven't you?" Kate teased. "You are past your sell-by date, you know."

Alex laughed. His whole face sparkled and Kate took pleasure in seeing him relax so. "Am I now? Well, that must be it then," he said before taking a large gulp of ale. "No woman will have me now."

"Maybe that rough exterior of yours has scared them all off."

"Just as well then."

Before Kate could prod the issue further, a young woman stepped onto the patio carrying a plate in each hand. Finding Alex, she smiled warmly and placed the lunches on the table. "Anythin' else I kin get fer ye?" Her question was directed to Alex as though Kate was invisible.

Flirtatious dark eyes swept over her buxom front and then to her appreciative flushed cheeks. "Nay, darlin," he answered kindly with the same accent. "Thank ye."

Kate understood the barmaid's attraction but at the same time couldn't help the sting of jealousy that slapped her heart. Trying to distract herself, she peered at her plate and said, "This looks delicious." Half a loaf of French bread, two assortments of cheese, pickle and a small salad. Popping the egg shaped pickle into her mouth she winced as the sharp vinegar exploded into her sinuses. "Mighty little things aren't they?" she said after a coughing fit.

Alex didn't notice her break from etiquette. He was chasing the pickle on his plate with his fork. "Where's your sister?" he asked. "Why were ye alone last night?"

Kate explained best she could, avoiding the supernatural goal of her sister's visit for now. This didn't seem the place. She was having too much fun with the living to bring up the dead.

"A psychologist." He caught the pickle and devoured it without flinching. "Sounds interesting. Does she know this professor?"

Kate raised her brow and smirked. "She does now."

"Oh." Alex nodded. "Just like a Daniels then?"

"Don't start." Kate knew he was joking but wasn't about to let him take liberties. Mally's social flirtations were her personal affairs. It had nothing to do with Kate's attitude to men in general, more sour than the pickle.

Alex held his palms up in acquiescence. Having eaten only half of what was on his plate, he leaned back in his chair, propped his feet on the wall, and clutched his drink. "So she'll be there awhile?" he asked.

"A few days." As much as she was attracted to him, she didn't want him to think she was available. Even though the prospect of another night alone in that house was unnerving. "What do you do for a living?" she asked. "Obviously nothing nine-to-five."

"Little bit of everything." He winked at her. "I like to work with my hands mostly."

Heat rapidly overwhelmed Kate's cheeks. It was too obvious she had caught his suggestion; her blush caused her more embarrassment.

"I hope ye don't play poker, Ceitag," he laughed. "Ye'd lose a bag of money."

"You're teasing me," she scolded.

He waved his forefinger at her and grinned. "Now ye see, a true Daniels lass wouldna blushed at that."

"Then let that be a lesson to you, Mr. MacTavish." Kate dabbed the corners of her mouth with overzealous demureness. "Maybe I'm not related after all."

She met his gaze, now strangely mellow and dreamy. At first she reckoned he wanted to tell her a deep forbidding secret, and when he leaned slowly to her, she tipped her ear to one side. The feathered stroke of his fingers under her chin sent a luscious shiver through her breast. Automatically twisting to sooth the tickle, her mouth brushed his, and before she had a chance to react he had kissed her, skillfully gentle, indicative of his need to share the secret hanging on his lips.

The hand cupped her cheek and he drew back enough to peer into her eyes. Kate took a quick breath in preparation to ask him if something was troubling him, but before she had the chance his mouth was on hers, his taste an avalanche of sensuality. She closed her eyes to the world, willing the patio and the other patrons to vanish and succumbed to the graceful inundation of his wet kiss.

His jaw vigorously worked with the seductive invasion of his tongue. It and the heat that penetrated her cheek from his hand were so absorbing that Kate could think of nothing else. Every nerve ending vibrated to meet his gesture, and she welcomed his advance, her fingers reaching approval to the flexing tendons on his neck.

And with a gratifying sigh he pulled away.

Slightly intoxicated Kate blinked and steadied her balance by clutching the chair.

"Another?" he asked.

"Kiss, or a drink?"

His brown knuckle stroked her neck. "Your choice," he drawled, knowing full

well she was totally enraptured with him.

Clearing her throat Kate shook off as much of his spell as possible and ordered another drink. I think I'll need it, she thought, willing her heartbeat to slow before bursting from her ribcage.

Alex picked up their empty glasses and headed inside.

And Kate couldn't help but notice the envious glare from the barmaid who was delivering plates to a nearby table. "Sorry, sweetheart," Kate said under her smirk. "This one is mine."

## Chapter Nine

Kate dreamt that night, not about abandonment or blood in the snow or a mysterious faceless Highlander, but about the wind flowing past her face and a remote country village by the sea and Alex. She stirred more than once under the covers to reach toward his embrace and kiss, and woke, despondent that his presence had only been a dream.

Until she remembered, in its entirety, the afternoon they had shared.

The only truly awkward moment was when they had returned and Kate judiciously tried to ask him to join her for the evening, not wanting to sound suggestive, or frightened, or, God forbid, desperate. And if any of that crept through in her invitation he didn't comment, saying only that he had a few things he needed to take care of, and by the time she reached the door he was driving out in the direction of the village.

Then Mally called with a thousand and one questions, which Kate delighted in answering. She relished the emotion she heard in her own voice when retelling the wonderful day she had shared with Alex, and Mally, true to form, intercepted every once in awhile with a teasingly drawn out, "ah-h-h." She ended by saying she didn't feel guilty anymore about planning to stay in the city. Apparently she and 'Tim' were getting along fabulously.

"See," Kate heard Mally's squeaky voice as she drifted off to sleep, "I told you this trip would be a good idea."

And as pleasant as her afternoon had been, she didn't want Alex to think she relied on him for entertainment. So this morning she would fulfill her ambition to visit Gillewne, estimating the walk would take her no more than half an hour at a steady pace. The sky was clear, but she grabbed her jacket, just in case.

Becoming more of a native than I thought, she grinned as she stepped outside.

There was no sign of Alex. The stables were quiet, the doors closed. The Morgan must be safely tucked inside. She would drop by on her way back to invite him to have dinner with her, perhaps. Her stomach swished with butterflies.

Forty minutes later Kate was inching her way through a bustling cobbled street.

Not in the mood to shop, she wound her way through narrow alleys in the direction of the stone church. Since the arched front doorway was fastened, she didn't try to get inside. Her interest was in the graveyard Mally had mentioned anyway, so she picked her way round the side and into the ancient burial place.

Many of the stones were weatherworn, the inscriptions smoothed by the harsh elements, yet the name Campbell was indeed prominent. Clumps of lichen inched into the curved lettering, weeds sprouted from the base of some of the beige stones, and as she floated reverently between each, she noticed that the ones most faded went back over two hundred years ago. 'Stewart', 'Robert', 'William'. 'James'. Not much variation in titles. There were no recent burials here, and Kate wondered where the previous owner of Kirkland Hall was laid to rest. She swept her head from side to side. The only other names here were MacTavish, Sutherland, and Anderson. Some smaller markers were



merely inscribed, "Infant Son" or "Infant Daughter". Disease, strains of childbirth and malnutrition certainly took its toll.

Deliberating the prospect of short lives was inducing melancholy in her. It was a place she didn't want to visit. When her stomach rumbled, reminding her she had skipped out that morning with only a cup of coffee, Kate delighted in the idea of another pub lunch. The Boar's Head, she remembered, was near by.

The outside door of the pub was held back with a chalkboard, a half dozen lunch specials scrawled in advertisement. As she pushed open the inner door, the smell of hot food mixed with the pungent odor of stale beer wafted a greeting.

The jukebox music within was muffled by the crypt-like rooms, which were sectioned off by thick partitions. The ceiling was low; the windows were high. Only small decorative lamps lighted corners shrouded in shadows. Two elderly ladies sat together in one area, digging with gusto into meat pies and chips. Except for one other customer, a scrawny, white-haired man sitting at the far end of the bar, the pub was empty.

Kate slunk shyly to the bar, looking for someone to take her order. The absence of help did not go unnoticed. "Agnes," the old man shouted. "Git yer self oot 'ere and 'elp this wee lassie." A squat pudgy woman waddled from what must have been the kitchen. Her greeting was accompanied by a clatter of pots behind the swinging door.

"What kin I git fer ye, lovie?" she asked affectionately. Her voice was beautifully musical. Unfortunately the rest of her was rather frightening. Eyes a bit like the boar on the sign outside peeped out from fat cheeks. A mustache consisting of a few coarse black hairs protruded from above her lip, which was curled happily waiting for an order.

"Ah," Kate stumbled, trying not to stare. All she could remember from the menu was what the ladies were tucking into. "Meat pie, please, and a pint of lager."

The pencil plucked brow lifted, creasing her forehead like an accordion into the line of gray hair pulled tightly back with an army of bobby pins. Stray strands stuck out at odd angles all over her head. "A pint is it no?" she laughed, cracking a view of several missing teeth. Layers beneath the pasty skin of her arm reverberated with the pumping motion of the ale being dispensed. The froth sloshed over the brim when she placed the glass on the bar. "Steak or lamb?"

"Pardon? Oh, the pie. Steak, please." The pub had suddenly become quite muggy, and Kate felt small beads of sweat pop out on her forehead.

When the woman waddled off back through the swinging doors, the man beside her at the bar sprang to life. "Ugly, is she no?" he smirked, revealing his lapses in dental hygiene. "Angel o' death called on her twice, took one look and ran off. Heart o' gold, though. Names John." He stuck out a hand bent with arthritis. Kate was hesitant to squeeze too hard.

"Kate," she replied, shaking his limp hand gently. "Pleasure to meet you."

"American," he spit, like a child in a classroom shouting out an answer he knew to be true.

"Close," she said, settling on the barstool two stools down from him. "Canada. Nova Scotia to be exact."

His bloodshot eyes narrowed. "Aye. I 'eard of it. New Scotland, is it no?"

"Yes, that's right. There are quite a few Scottish names in the phone book."

"What air ye?"

"My name is Daniels."

His red nose and cheeks grew even redder as he started to shake with laughter and Kate stiffened slightly at a joke she was getting quite tired of. She slid aside politely to avoid a spray of spittle.

"Hear that, Agnes," he called. "Lassie's a Daniels."

"Oh, aye," Agnes smiled, pushing a plate containing the meat pie, chips and peas in front of Kate. "Air ye here serchin' ancestors?"

"Can't miss the wide graves," he joked. "Those lasses weir all buried in y-shaped coffins--took up twice the space as any other."

"Dinna ye mind that foul ol' mouth," Agnes counseled. Pointing her fleshy finger in his face she chided, "And ye, ye nasty bugger, likely sampled a few Daniel lassies yerself in yer day."

"Aye," he answered proudly. "True enough. And would still if my pool cue were no made of rope."

Kate concerned herself with eating as quickly as possible. Charming as this conversation was, she didn't want ol' John to think she was typical of the obvious Daniels free-wheeling affections. Nor did she want the attention that came with the supposed behavior of all Daniel women.

The bantering between barmaid, if that was a proper title for Agnes, and ol' John carried on for considerable time, and the more heated their debate, the less of the accent Kate could understand. She caught the occasional word, which, by the familiarity they shared, was doled out in good humor. Keeping her eyes on her diminishing lunch she prayed to be kept out of the conversation.

"Another pint?" Agnes asked, seeing the glass was nearly empty, an unforgivable picture in any pub.

"Thank you, no. I must be getting back."

"Where air ye staying?" Agnes asked politely.

"Oh." Not wanting to go into too much detail, she kept her answer short and direct. "Kirkland Hall. Just a couple of weeks."

"Och, aye," ol' John drawled. He winked at Agnes. "Young MacTavish is it no?" He turned to Kate. "Weel, if a MacTavish weapon canna satisfy a Daniels lass, then I might as weel roll over dead."

"I'm beginnin' to wish ye would anyway," Agnes scolded. "Every village has un," she added for Kate's benefit. "Lucky me that ours spends 'is 'ole day 'ere!"

Ol' John wasn't about to be put off so quickly, however. Leaning to Kate she reeled with a blast of whiskey-breath. "A reputation MacTavish lads have. Yer a lucky lass." He shook his head and peered into his glass, mumbling something about lost youth and if given half the chance could give the whole clan a run for their money to the incessant 'tisk-tisk' from behind the bar.

Kate leaned across the bar and asked Agnes where the washrooms were located.

"Ours air outside," she explained. "Back door and to the right."

Kate passed the kitchen, catching movement within from the corner of her eye, but continued her trek down the narrow corridor towards the small yard at the back. Barrels, wood and steel, sat everywhere against one brick wall, and Kate was about to take the step into the bright sunshine, when she caught more movement, this time from one of the barrels in the corner.

Bolting backwards into the shadow of the doorway she gasped in disbelief. A girl, no more than twenty years old, was sitting on a barrel, her long slender legs wrapped provocatively around the middle of ... Alex MacTavish, who writhed his narrow hips with suggestion, bouncing her playfully in the process.

She giggled between her fluttering kisses, running her painted nails through his hair, and flickering her eyelashes with the flushed expression of a woman who knew from experience the talents of a MacTavish weapon.

And him! He squeezed one voluptuous breast with his left hand while stroking her flaxen blonde ringlets with the other. After he mumbled something sultry she tittered, tipped back her chin to expose a long deer-like neck and he ran the tip of his tongue from her ear to shivering cleavage.

Kate could stomach no more. Her hand flung to where a heart had once beat sincerity and hope and belief. But now!

Again. Thrown aside for another. The whole nightmare was happening again!

Carrying herself with as much dignity as she could muster, she rocketed through the pub, waving a polite but shaky farewell to the couple still bickering across the bar. Trembling from betrayal and dismissal, her mind was numb until she flew through the living room door of Kirkland Hall. The forty-minute walk had taken her less than twenty on the return.

Not knowing whether to give in to anger or depression, she kicked the couch before slumping into it shedding tears of frustration. And not so much for what Alex had done, was doing, but for what she had done: allowed her heart to fill with the silly notion he might have fallen as deeply in love with her as she had with him.

That was it. That was why she hurt so badly. Try as she might to keep her feelings guarded, she had actually, within a few days, fallen madly, wholly in love with Alex MacTavish. And this is what she got in return for letting her guard down.

Spying the bottle of whiskey he had discovered the night before, she poured a drink and tried to keep her temper under control. Waves of emotion washed throughout her chest and after each retreated, she took a hard swallow and waited for the next.

Then logic patiently spoke.

"You're a foreigner," it told her. "Here for merely a few weeks. As a result you shouldn't expect to be treated as a local. He lives here and has a dozen girlfriends and why not? Handsome, charming, a man available and of property. What did you expect?"

Kate bit into her bottom lip to keep it from shivering. She should have clung to the animosity of her first impression. He was moody, conniving, and probably nasty. Arrogance towards her wasn't working, so he poured on flattery, filling her head with stories about clan connections and love-lost apparitions, and when she had sucked it all in he would kiss her. To think she nearly fell for his seduction. Another game! He was mocking her, having a high old laugh, probably sharing with his little girlfriend how stupid she had been and how easy it would be to get her to sign everything over.

"Well!" Kate growled. "You're in for a surprise, Buddy-boy! If you think I'm signing this place over to you with a kiss and a smile, you have another thought coming."

So, what to do now?

Pack. Leave. Go to Edinburgh and find Mally. She wouldn't be happy with the intrusion on her budding affair but that was just too bad. She would have to cope. It was her idea after all, to come to this forsaken part of the world. They'd deal with Mr.

MacTavish through the lawyer in Glasgow, get as much as possible, pay their expenses and leave forever.

*Forever. Don't let go. Please, don't leave me.*

Kate shivered. The house--its voices, the impenetrable sadness, its hope in her--all cumulated in an attempt to reach out, whispering for her to forgive, wait, understand. Hope for all things beautiful, for the future, for love.

"I'm sorry," she found herself saying aloud, as though the walls had again bent to listen. "I'm not the one who can help you. If I can't resolve my own problems of the heart, I don't know how I can heal yours."

And she wasn't sure, but she thought she heard a soft sigh drenched in total sadness.

## Chapter Ten

Kate had snapped the catches on her suitcase when she heard the distinct roll of tires on the gravel outside. She was bracing herself to face Alex to ask him--no, demand of him--to drive her to the nearest train station so she could be rid of him and this place as soon as possible. And if he couldn't figure out why, then that was his problem. Their intimate conversations and whatever else he had his hopes up for, had come to a crashing conclusion.

Reaching the front door Kate realized she was smiling in anticipation to see the confused expression on his face when she ordered her transportation. He would certainly ask what her motivation was, and with any luck there would be fear mixed in. After all, the property was his main concern. It was the Ace she continued to hold up her sleeve. She'd make him suffer. Not as badly as she had suffered, but the knife would definitely go in.

Wrenching the door open, she stormed out to find, not Alex looking confused and apologetic as she had wanted, but Doug's wife, Cindy. She had parked near the front step and was slipping out from behind the wheel with a small case in her hands. Focusing on Kate with pleading eyes she said, "I'm so glad yer home, Kate. I have a wee bit of a favor to ask."

Kate was too abashed to speak. A favor? "Oh, I ... don't know, I..."

"Before ye say no, let me explain and then ye decide." Her smile was so pleasant that Kate wilted at the suggestion and before realizing it had invited her in and they were sitting together sharing a glass of whiskey.

"My sister runs a small hotel. Bit of a money pit it is, and she's bin havin' trouble of late makin' ends meet. Anyway, summer's an earner fer her cause tourists come, and right now she's got a group of Americans, mostly Campbells, ye see, and we want to put on a show fer them. The hotel has a banquet hall, set up like in medieval times, and weel, poor lass hasna been feeling proper of late and so I promised to do the entertainin' for them in her stead. And wouldna ye know it," she tugged her earlobe in concern, "I find myself short staffed. Then I said to Clara, that's my eldest lass, I said, Clara, I know jist the wee flower who could help us out, rumbling about in this stuffy ol' place by herself. I thought perhaps ye would like the entertainment--Doug puts on a great show, bless him--and help us out at the same time."

"What would I have to do? I mean, I don't especially sound local."

Cindy laughed, rocking gently as she perched on the edge of the sofa. "Och, nay, ye dinna sound local, is true, but ye don't even have to talk if ye dinna want to. We just need an extra pair o' hands, is all." She lifted her brow in anticipation. "What do ye say?"

A favor. Night's entertainment. What harm would it be? And then in the morning she could ask a favor in return: a drive to the train station. Kate nodded. "Certainly. As long as you don't expect too much from me. I'm no entertainer."

Relief flooded over Cindy's cheeks. She clasped her tiny hands together and sunk

into the cushion. "Oh, I can't thank ye enough!" she squealed. "Yer a life saver." She folded forward and unzipped the case she carried in. "In the event ye agreed, I brought yer costume."

"Costume?" Kate was regretting her decision already.

"Oh, aye." Cindy waved her hand as though it was nothing. "All the lasses wear a little somethin' to show they're staff, and we try to make the banquet seem authentically Scottish for the tourists, ye see. They eat it up, although living here we take our odd habits for granted." She chuckled softly and then tightened her lips as though guarding her words.

"What do you want me to do?" Kate was cautiously leery.

"Wear this and just float about being friendly to the guests. More of a wallflower than anything." She squelched a grin behind her hand in the form of a cough. "Now then," she said finally, pulling out the clothes. "Let's get ye dressed."

The tiny woman burst into action, and Kate was jostled, twirled, prodded, and finally, smoothed and patted. Throwing her arms out with satisfaction, Cindy stared admiringly up and down and made approving noises in the back of her throat, as only a Scots could do. "Ye look a treat," she sang. "Al... er, I mean, all the lasses will be jealous."

Kate examined her apparel in the mirror. A white silk blouse with a stiff high collar contrasted the deep burgundy of the snug velvet jacket. Gold buttons fastened at a push; it was tighter than Kate would have liked. "Was no sure of yer size," Cindy apologized. "But ye look fine."

The skirt fit perfectly, however. Kate swirled, allowing the long pleated plaid to lap over the top of her laced doeskin boots. Beneath that were long black stockings. "Won't I be too warm in this?" Kate asked.

"Nay. Be thankful the stockings are cotton and not wool which is traditional. But I dinna think yer undergarments will be examined." She smothered another smirk.

"Now, fer yer accessories." Cindy knelt to dig in the case and came up with jewelry. "Yer ears air pierced? Good." She handed Kate delicate silver earrings, two hearts linked together beneath a crown. There was a necklace to match.

"These are lovely," Kate commented, fiddling with the chain. "What do they symbolize?"

Cindy stammered, "Oh, aye, weel, something about Prince Charlie." She avoided Kate's inquisitive stare. "Yer broach next," she said, pinning the ruby colored stone to her jacket. "And to finish, a ring." More silver, a broad band, with intricate interlacing knot work. Cindy grabbed Kate's left hand and jammed it quickly on her ring finger.

"Finished?" Kate asked, feeling very much a storefront display for a kilt shop.

"Almost." Cindy peered admiringly to Kate. "Ye are a love to do this."

"Yeah, I know. But maybe I'll be asking a return favor."

"Anything." She passed Kate long gloves. "Once we git there we'll pin the wreath in yer hair."

Kate's jaw dropped slightly. "A wreath? Just what am I supposed to dressing as, anyway?"

Cindy was zipping the limp case and digging in her pocket for the car keys. "The Lady of the Loch."

"Pardon?"

“Look at the time. Come then, lass, or we’ll be late.”

\* \* \* \*

The hotel wasn’t as small as Kate had imagined. The distinct lack of other buildings in its vicinity may have given the illusion of size. A sizeable parking lot contained an assortment of vehicles and two monstrous tour buses, which could squash the tiny cars near by with one wheel.

Cindy chatted incessantly all the way and continued her explanations as they strolled into the main lobby. “I’m chief cook and bottle washer, so I’ll be out o’ sight most o’ the time. But I’ll give ye a quick tour before I check up on the proceedings.”

Two rosy-cheeked youths from behind the reception desk looked up with a welcoming hello. After a quick glance at Kate they tipped their heads towards each other and whispered. Her performance as an anomaly had begun.

Narrow steps off to the right led to guestrooms upstairs, offices to the left, and at the end of the musty hall, Cindy folded back a long panel which opened into the banquet hall. She pressed knuckles into her hips and examined the final stages of preparation.

A platform had been erected across the far end of the hall, the long table decorated with bows of soft burgundy to match the bouquets of flowers at each end. Sprigs of heather sprouted from containers everywhere. Long tables ran in opposite directions along the main floor, so guests could plainly view those who would sit in the place of honor on the stage.

“Who’s sitting at the main table?” Kate asked.

Cindy startled from study and mumbled, “Oh, the wedding party.” Then she wondered off, straightening the odd piece of china that may have appeared out of place, and scolding anyone who might be near by who hadn’t already seen the error.

The only utensil beside each simply designed plate was a shiny tin spoon, and near that pewter goblets for drinks. Tiny bowls containing salt were dotted about between every third or fourth plate. And although the main table was covered in white linen, these were rather stark looking wooden benches.

Except for the sound system, discreet speakers positioned high on the wall in each corner, the hall had a distinctive medieval flavor. Familiar black Tudor beams crisscrossed the walls, the honey wood between mirroring the benches and tables. From each beam hung fat brown candles. Every two feet along the wall were tall, weighty candlesticks, six on each side, which were in the process of being lighted. Kate tipped her chin heavenward. Electric lights were everywhere, but wouldn’t have the same ambiance, for certain, as the flickering candles.

Nice touch, she smiled. After a few initial misgivings, Kate was warming to the idea this could be fun after all. “Very attractive,” Kate said. “Whoever has done all this did a wonderful job.”

Cindy grinned appreciatively. “Thank ye for saying so. I think so, too. We’re hosting about sixty this evening.” She took a quick look at her watch. “Starts soon, so I better get myself in gear.” Taking Kate’s arm she led her into a corridor, its entrance hidden behind a tapestry. Several shoebox rooms were muggy from human activity.

“Clara,” Cindy called. A younger clone drifted over. “This is Kate, and she’s agreed to ... ah, ye know.”

Red curls shimmered above a knowing nod. “Aye. Kate, lovely to meet ye. We’ve heard so much about ye.”

“Really?” Kate asked, her normal suspicion sweeping in for the kill. “And what...?”

“Clara,” her mother said. “Will ye be so kind as to fix Kate’s makeup, and I’ll get the wreath.”

“Oh, aye,” the young Cindy agreed. “Have a seat.” And while dabbing and fluffing Clara went into detail about her own role as waitress. The meal was to be basic. Rye bread was to be passed around, and the guests were to break off what they needed to have with split pea soup. “Then we place platters of beef, sliced already of course, on the tables. Potatoes and carrots, and,” she chuckled, “if they don’t want to keep using their spoon they have to pick with the fingers. After we get everything on the table, we circle about making sure the tankards are ne’er empty.”

“Am I to help with that? I mean, I’m sure I could manage to keep drinks filled.”

“No dressed like this, ye willna serve. Nay, I think Mother has other plans for ye.”

“Now then,” Cindy called as she scurried into the room. “Here are yer flowers. Ye dinna have to wear it all night. I think that would be askin’ too much.” The wreath was being pinned into Kate’s hair. A jab in the wrong direction made her flinch. “Before dinner ye can take it off.”

After a quick glance Kate could plainly see she was the only one with a whole flower garden stuck in her head. “Why am I...?”

Suddenly the room was distracted with Doug’s enthusiastic compliments. “Och, weel, who’s this lovely lass?” His deep voice bellowed cheerfully throughout the small room.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” Kate returned the compliment.

The transformation from the man she had met in the driveway to this dashing Highlander was astounding. Dressed in full regalia, kilt, dark double-breasted tunic, sporran and at his knees, a red jeweled *skean dhu* protruded from one high woolen sock. He carried himself straight and proud, even his belly seemed to be tucked discreetly away beneath the belt. “So I keep telling everyone,” he said, his cheeks already flushed from a few too many glasses of whiskey. “But as master of ceremonies I dinna have the option but to be a Highland Stud.” He slapped his barreled chest and chortled.

Clara rolled her eyes. “Pathetic ol’ man,” she sighed.

“Where’s the groom?” Doug asked innocently. To which his only reply a brisk kick in the shin from Cindy. Clearing his throat, Doug excused himself and darted away.

Kate stiffened. Her heart stopped beating as she turned horrified eyes between mother and daughter, who both looked decisively guilty. “What’s going on?”

“Go get Kate a wee drink,” Cindy demanded of her daughter who sighed in relief to have an excuse to exit.

“Cindy,” Kate was grinding her clenched teeth. When she tried to stand up Cindy eased her down again.

“It were Doug’s idea so ye canna blame me.”

Bagpipe music screeched from the banquet hall. When Clara returned with a drink, the rumble of a crowd milling about outside burst through with her. Kate’s hand froze in mid air waiting for the glass, which ended up tipped against Cindy’s chin. Passing the empty glass to her disgusted daughter, she said, “Get the bottle.”

And holding the door for Clara’s second trip out was Alex.



“Quite a crowd tonight,” he said. “Air they all Campbells? Breed like rabbits that lot.”

Cindy coughed politely into her hand and mumbled, “I’ll go tell Doug the groom is here,” and to Kate’s horror, she, too dashed from the room.

“What do ye think?” Alex smiled, holding his arms out and spinning to show her his whole outfit. “Tried to look as dapper as Doug, but I would likely have a way to go yet.” He picked off a piece of lint from the velvet tunic and ruffed the white jabot at his neck. Realizing Kate hadn’t said anything, he met her glare and shifted uncomfortably. “What? Something wrong?”

“I’m *your* bride?” Kate’s fists were doubling.

“Aye, and a mighty pretty one, too! Funny, is it no, seeing we were just talking about this yesterday.”

Nostrils flaring, Kate tried counting to ten but it wasn’t helping the bubbling volcano within her chest. “They didn’t tell me I was going to be a bride, let alone *your* bride.”

“Did they no? Och, well., no harm done. All ye have to do is sit beside me at the guest table and flash yer pretty smile. We’ll have fun.” He reached over to take her hand. “Especially during our honeymoon.”

The volcano erupted.

“Do-not-even-think-about-it.” Kate wrenched her chair backwards. It fell with a clatter as she stood up. Her expression must have reflected the steaming demon inside. Alex took one mortified look at her and stepped aside. More than the sporran was protecting his privates.

“I will not be another notch on your bedpost, lover-boy.”

Alex’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What...?”

“Don’t play the innocent with me,” she spit, her voice lifting. “I saw you this morning, you disgusting pervert. She didn’t look old enough to be potty trained let alone someone’s sex toy. And then you come in here all sugary sweet and hint I’ll play alone on some mock wedding and a cute little honeymoon. I don’t think so.” Her head didn’t spin three hundred and sixty degrees but it came close.

Alex held his palms up in pacification. “Wait a minute,” he said calmly, “You were at The Boar’s Head today?”

“Oh, Sherlock,” Kate flashed exasperation. “Give the man a medal. He’s a genius.”

A change she hadn’t expected came over Alex’s demeanor. His groin a safe distance from her knee, he folded his arms, leaned against the wall, and smiled, a breezy, relaxed, unworried smile. And it infuriated her even more.

“What?” she demanded.

“Ye’re jealous.” Black eyes sparkled with gratification.

“I am not. I’m disgusted, appalled, you’re a cradle robber. I was sadly mistaken you had the ability to be a gentleman but you’re nothing but a slithering, conniving, dirty...”

Alex bristled. He seemed to puff out in all directions as his chest responded to a sharp intake of air. “Now wait just a minute,” he pressed. “I dinna know why yer knickers are in such a twist, but I havena done anything wrong.”

“Nothing wrong?” Kate’s mouth was dangling open. She was momentarily lost

for words. "But ... but..."

"Aye, I see now," Alex smirked. "Ye think because I give ye a little feel then ye have first rights to me, is it no? Why am I not surprised, ye likely dinna get much attention, do ye?"

The demonic growl in the Kate's throat gurgled froth. "You are an egotistical pig."

"Me? Ye're the one with the attitude, missy. Forgive me for saying, but I don't think it's any of yer concern what I do, and with whom I do it with." His swarthy complexion had flushed. "Besides," he threw an exaggerated glance of revulsion from head to toe, "why would I eat an ol' sow when I can have spring lamb?"

It was at this unfortunate point that Doug stuck his head through the doorway and slurred, "Guests air waitin' on the bride and groom. Ye ready now?"

Alex took one leap, locked his arm around hers, and fought her violent twist. "And just for being such a sassy wee sow, I am going to make certain ye go through with this." Frog marching her to the door, he said, a plastered grin on his own face, "Now smile, wife, and show our guests how happy I make ye."

Before Kate had the opportunity to wipe the red speckles from her vision, she was being lead through a standing sea of people, all greeting her with admiring gestures and applause. A handful of others in costume appeared behind them, supposedly the bride's maids and the groom's best man, all of whom she had never seen before. She caught a discreet wave from Clara, however, who was pouring drinks into each goblet along one table. Bagpipe music blatted as they strode casually towards the platform. And to her surprise she was indeed smiling and nodding to the crowd, despite the locked jaw that was beginning to cause some pain.

As Alex pulled out the chair for her to take her place at the head table, she snarled, "I don't know how but I'm going to make you pay for this."

He leaned to her ear and sweetly answered, "Ye already have, wife. Ye already have."

"I am not your..."

"Ladies and gentleman, respected members of the clan Campbell," Doug's voice bounced off every wall, "the clan MacTavish welcomes ye to our home and thanks ye all for joining us in celebrating the marriage of our brother Alexander and this fair, bonny lass, ah, Katherine, whom as ye can all see is flushed with the anticipation of the wedding bed..."

Unabashed laughter erupted from the audience.

"Oh, God." Kate wilted. "I'll never get through this with my sanity."

Alex, however, was full of the flowers of spring, and slapped his chest proudly before sitting down. "Ye didn't have any to begin with," he said.

Kate gave him as vicious a slap as possible with the space restriction under the table. The jolt rattled a few dishes. Not missing Doug's attention he wailed, "Och, but look, we've embarrassed the poor lassie, she's chastised him again. We won't want her to damage the jewels, ye ken. Might come in handy fer later. Sit everyone," he issued. "Sit and let us begin the festivities." The microphone snapped off with a piercing scream.

Clara had crept up behind and was pulling the pins that clasped the wreath in Kate's hair. "Enjoying it so far?" she asked slyly.

“Clara, I don’t care what’s in that jug, but bring me a full one and leave it by my side.”

An army of waitresses, or wenches as they were expected to be called, streamed in from the kitchen first with buns of bread and pots of soup, which was mercilessly slopped into bowls. The girls would dip and lean as they served, tantalizing every male with fleshy bosoms pushed up by tight corsets, and demurely chastising the hands that wandered too near. Kate wasn’t the only ‘wife’ slapping her ‘husband’ under the table.

Kate had, not surprisingly, little appetite. Her stomach still knotted from the anxiety of her predicament, she ran her spoon aimlessly through the pale green soup and finally gave up. Alex, on the other hand, had actually picked up the bowl and slurped loudly, rolling a watchful eye to her every few seconds, to make certain she caught his medieval table manners. Not wanting to give him the satisfaction of even her disapproval she ignored him.

“What’s the matter, my flower?” he asked innocently, over-exaggerating a blinking of lashes. “No with child already, are ye?”

Kate flinched. Her lips were squeezed together so tightly her whole face trembled. She glanced behind him. “That chair doesn’t have a plug for an electrical socket by any chance, does it?” She grabbed her goblet and downed the honeyed drink in one. At least something was helping to ease the humiliation.

Before the main course was ushered in, Doug snatched the microphone snapping on to a blast of filtered air. The rumble of conversation in the audience slowed in anticipation of the next monologue.

“Honored guests,” he began. “This wedding has reflected the peace and good will we enjoy between our clans, and as a tribute to continued good will, allow me to be the first to ask the happy couple to share a wee kiss, as confirmation of our desire for a future of serenity and friendship.”

All eyes turned to the stage. Kate slumped at the same time that Alex stood. Clearing his throat he lifted his goblet to the expectancy that rippled throughout the hall and shouted, “I thank ye, good brother, for allowing me to share this, the most important day of my life with our kinsmen and it is my deepest desire that every man in this room is as overwrought with the pleasures of marriage as I.” After a short pause he added, “And enjoy the pleasures of the night as much as I. A toast to the sanctity of the marriage bed!” Thrusting the goblet forward it was met in accordance with a mumbling of, “Here! Here!” and the sound of drinking in union.

Kate’s knuckles were white, her whole body coiled like a spring, so when Alex grabbed her arm and tugged, she lifted from her chair so quickly even he was momentarily surprised. Regaining his composure he turned and threw out welcoming arms to which the crowd cheered, “Kiss! Kiss!”

A vein in Kate’s temple was shivering uncontrollably but the strong drink was weakening her resolve to the situation that had entrapped her. I’ll get my revenge later, she repeated mentally and when she turned and glared at her ‘husband’ his eyes widened slightly in fright at the demon of retribution that waited for his act of affection. “Yes,” she whispered. “Kiss me and see what will happen.”

Through a feigned smile he whispered back, “Yer not going to knee me in the bollocks again, are ye?”

Kate wiggled her brow and waited for her kiss, which ended up as a quick peck

on her cheek.

Doug's voice kicked in with, "Saving the best for later, air ye? Weel, as it should be. Wenches! The main course, please!"

The bagpipe screeched again and the audience's attention was diverted from the stage to their meal. And despite her situation Kate was beginning to find a sadistic pleasure of her own in Alex's growing nervousness; he inched his chair slightly away from her. For the time being the reins were back in her hands. Maybe she could salvage some fun from all this after all.

Through most of the meal Kate remained coldly silent. Alex sighed often, his broad shoulders flexing with a growing awkwardness until finally leaning to her and whispering, "I think we should talk."

"Really?" she answered sarcastically. "And what might you have to say?"

"It wasna what it looked."

"Oh. You were resuscitating her, were you?"

Alex swallowed a growl. "Kate, I can explain."

"I don't care whether you can or not. Like you said, your affairs," she shot him a glare at the connotation, "are your own concern. I'm just an old sow anyway."

"I dinna mean that. Ye made me angry."

"I made *you* angry? Well, forgive me for being so impolite." She threw down her spoon with a clatter. "Mustn't have that, now must we!"

"Will ye at least give me a chance?" His compliancy came close to calming her annoyance. Because of it she didn't answer either way.

Dishes were being whisked away as Doug picked up his microphone and announced that the dancing would soon begin. And the bride and groom would start the party.

Through her mock smile she said, "If I had known all this ahead of time I wouldn't be here."

"Aye," Alex answered. "I guess that's why ye weren't told."

"I'll dance, but immediately afterwards you take me back. Come tomorrow I'm leaving."

"What?" Alex sounded genuinely disconcerted. "No, Kate. Ye must no leave like this."

"Watch me."

Music was being pumped through the hall's sound system, and Doug was waving frantically for them to take their places on the opened floor. Alex stood and tugged her chair. Avoiding his questioning stare she gingerly stepped off the platform and turned to wait for Alex to accompany her. Sweeping her into his arms he leaned into her ear and softly whispered, "I am sorry."

"For what? Fondling her, or me seeing it?"

"Both."

He squeezed her hand against his shoulder and they began a slow waltz, shuffling in circles and pretending to be blissful for the sake of watching eyes. Before long other couples were sharing the floor and Kate was grateful that soon this charade would all be over.

"Will ye no give me at least one chance to explain?" he repeated, pulling her tighter to his chest.

“No.” Her voice was made of frost. “I know full well what lies the likes of you are capable of. I’ve heard it all before.”

“Och,” he moaned. “Ye’re a stubborn wee creature, aren’t ye?”

“And you’re a heartless skin-hound. Seems the world is full of your type.”

“Right,” he said. “That’s it.” And before she knew what was happening the room and its dancing inhabitants swung upside down as he folded her over his shoulder and carried her through the room as though she were a sack of potatoes.

“Put me down,” she shrieked, flaying her fists into the velvet tunic. But her sharp squeaks were to no avail. The last she heard from the banquet hall was someone muttering about what a lovely couple they were.

Effortlessly, he strode a steady pace up three sets of stairs, never missing a step, or acknowledging the litany of imaginative names she hurled for his benefit. He gave her body a short bounce to adjust her weight only when he reached the top landing and paused to open the stiff fire door that separated the stairwell from the hall.

Resigned to the fact she had been truly kidnapped, Kate stopped protesting. She was more concerned with his intentions. “What do you think you’re doing?” she spit, and not for the first time. The carpeted hallway she could see so clearly from her position melded into a contrasting color of a bedroom carpet. She spun again as he turned to close and lock the door.

And then she was being placed in a sturdy, wing-backed chair that overlooked an exquisitely decorated small room, complete with chests, television, phone, coffee machine and a four poster bed. The scene vanished as Alex quickly rolled each shoulder to discard his tunic and knelt before her, pinning her hands into her lap using arms now freed from the constrictions of his jacket.

His shimmering black eyes were directly in her line of vision, and he stared at her for what seemed eternity. Was this not like a predator, staring down its prey, weakening it into submission or a false sense of security before tearing the life out of its breast?

“I brought ye here so we could talk, in privacy. And since ye were hell bent of leaving with no hearing me out, I decided the situation demanded drastic action.” He shuffled closer, pressing his chest into her knees. “I’m sorry, but I truly need to say this.”

“Go on, then,” Kate said. “Seems I have no choice anyway. Say your piece and then I’m out of here.”

As though slightly wounded, Alex lowered his eyes, took a deep breath and started. “Despite what ye might think of me, I have a heart beating inside me.” He lifted his gaze to her again and smiled weakly. “One I’ve kept to myself. Ceitag, I’ve been alone all my life. I won’t lie to ye. I’ve had girlfriends and still do. But I’ve ne’er been in love. Thirty-eight years and ne’er been in love.” He chuckled softly. “Maybe I am pathetic. But know it to be true, Ceitag, when I first saw ye a rocket exploded in my chest. That’s never happened before and it scared me mightily. To be honest I didna know what to do, except fight the feelings. It fought back. And when we kissed....” His voice shuddered and he swallowed hard. “Ye’d be here for a few weeks and then what do I do? Worship the ground ye walk on and then watch ye walk away, leaving me to fill in a deeper hole in my chest? Something has happened between us, Ceitag. Ye feel it, too. I know ye do because I can see it in yer eyes. I also see that ye have been hurt and I only brought that all up for ye again, and believe me when I say I am sorry. We both have a past and we’ll both have a future, it’s just I....” He lowered his cheek to her lap,

loosening his hold on her wrists. "I dinna want to be alone any longer, Ceitag. I'm tired of living my life hugging shadows. Aye, I went to her, it's true, but I'll wake up tomorrow and ye'll only be a sweet dream. If I believed, truly believed, ye could love me, I know everything that's wrong could be put right."

Kate held her breath tightly in her throat. She instinctively willed her anger to continue but despite a valiant effort it was melting. And she reached, slow motion, to touch the silk cascade of dark hair against her lap. Finding a strand near his turned temple she stroked its softness while caressing the tensed muscle beneath his cheek with her thumb. He snuggled closer to the sensation and exhaled a wash of heat she felt through the heavy pleats of her skirt.

"Ceitag," he whispered, "I'd understand if ye leave and I'd never see ye again, but if ye feel the same, deep in yer heart as I pray that ye do, please, dinna go. Stay with me, here, tonight, and make love to me."

Simple words, direct from a longing within, soulful, genuine and true. Trapped, not like the prey she initially believed to be, but captive to heartfelt candor, its sticky web paralyzing every muscle within her body. And its seductive hold she welcomed.

Now it was her turn to shake away the cloak of arrogance, suspicion and heartache.

Words failed her. Her fingers trembled as she continued to stroke his hair.

The hands that had held her steady now clung to her, exuding a desperate need to be rescued. That need rippled through her, its immensity perilously demanding her compliance. And it was tearing her to pieces.

"Say something, Ceitag," he pleaded. "Tell me what ye're thinking."

Kate leaned closer and with her movement he pitched into her arms. She instantly felt his cheek pressing into her bosom while fingers crawled round her waist. Drowning in a sea of emptiness he was struggling for her rescue. Cradling his head tightly to her pounding chest she pressed her lips into the mass of heavy hair and whispered, "I have gone from wanting to stab you repeatedly to..."

Alex wrenched his neck free from her grasp and struck her full in the face with wide expectant eyes. A rapid pulse shivered through his cheeks. "To what, Ceitag? To what?"

His full lips parted she touched its wet softness with the tip of her finger. "To this," she sighed, and leaned forward to kiss him.

He watched her descent, disbelief slowly fading into a treasured hope. With the sweetness of the first contact, lips against lips, breath to breath, his lids closed and when she started to draw away his eyes snapped open. He studied her a moment, and when she smiled, a flush of sultriness clouded the air between them.

One solitary tear dropped from his lash and trickled a path down his cheek.

And as she reached to brush it tenderly away, he lunged, throwing his mouth on hers, engulfing her completely within the flexing muscle of his arms. Rich, luxurious, she returned his kiss with the enthusiasm of her own violent wantonness, tasting his lips, his tongue and pulling at the hair that wafted around her face and neck.

Without breaking the kiss, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed. Permission granted. Lovers lost, now found. Two bodies, two souls and a union filled with hope, desire, and passion.

Lowering her onto the bed he stared down at her, a hint of disbelief still etched

into the corners of his mouth. His palm cupped her face and she turned to its heat and kissed its smoothness. "Oh, Ceitag," his voice barely audible, "ye feel it, too?"

She nodded, once, and caught her breath as he swept his eyes longingly over her body.

"If ye mean to stop me, do so now. I will no have the strength if I go any further."

"I mean to find out what a Scotsman wears beneath his kilt," she teased.

A wicked grin crept over his face. "Aye," he whispered, "then I shall try not to disappoint ye."

Dimming the light so that it threw out nothing but a soft hue, he turned his attention to the buttons of her jacket, long fingers releasing each with ease. Its tightness expelled, her breasts relished the freedom. He hesitated before unfastening those of her blouse and she watched him: a boy, animated by the excitement of what prize might lie beneath the wrapping of a gift, not wanting to find out too soon, but relishing the thrill of expectation. He folded back the material to kiss the curve of her breast, his breath hot against flesh. And when she lifted her shoulders from the bed he swiftly rolled the material away and stroked her bare shoulder. "Ye are more beautiful than I imagined, and I imagined ye were a goddess beneath."

Fine hairs on her stomach stood to attention as he lowered his hand and unbuckled the belt of her skirt. She tipped to one side, allowing the garment to be pulled down, over the stockings, the doeskin boots and to the floor. Running his hand up the cotton on her leg he laughed with good-humor.

"What?" she asked, sharing his grin.

"She dressed ye well, did she no? Stockings and all." He fiddled with the laced elastic that held it tightly in place on her thigh.

"Yes. Seems your sister-in-law had great plans for us. Unbeknownst to me."

Alex's smile faded. "Aye," he mumbled, lost in thought. "And me. But I shall be indebted to her." He pressed his lips into the flesh above the stocking.

Kate winced slightly at his feathery touch. Her vulnerability was overwhelming and she shivered with a sudden bout of shyness. Sensing her reluctance, he withdrew. "Ye still have doubts?" Slipping closer he held her hand against his chest. "What beats within is yours, Ceitag. Make love to me and I'll ne'er let ye be alone again."

Coaxed by his sentimentality, assured that the growing passion was honest, she sat up and let her fingers work at the buttons. When she pulled the shirt from his body, she fell into the soft hollow of his neck and sighed. "You talk too much."

Enveloped within the scent of his chest, she kissed his throat, his chin and his mouth, pulling him down into her welcoming arms. The hard contraction of steely muscles beneath his shoulder pressed breath from her breast. She felt an urge to dominate her, prove his power, and he lifted his weight slightly, bracing his bulk on elbows, which eased into her sides. The wool of his kilt tickled her bare thigh and she giggled quietly at the scratching sensation.

There were too many clothes between their bodies and Kate was aching for the nakedness that stretched beneath.

He knew her desire. He felt it in her quickening heartbeat, saw it lurk behind half-closed lids and he, too, yearned for her touch, a more intimate touch. "It's time," he said coyly, "to find out what belongs to ye." Sliding to one side he took her hand,

guiding it down the heaving mass of dark hair covering his chest, across the bare skin of his hip and under the folds of his kilt.

Watching her eyes he swallowed a heavy lump. The wool inched higher on the weighty thigh, thick and hard like trunk of a tree, and she gasped as he pushed her fingers towards another hardness, that of desire and need. Her hand now lost beneath his, encouraging her to hold that one part of his body, explore and understand the extent of his craving. And as she squeezed her fingers tightly around him, he shivered and groaned, its sound washing through her with a mounting lust that drew her own moan free.

Her breast lifted. The air that filled her lungs was muggy, and she believed, truly, her heart would stop. And when she exhaled his mouth washed into her lips. "Ye make me tremble, Ceitag. I shall ne'er let ye go now."

"Nor I you," she whispered, coiling her fingers tighter, and loosening them again, as though he would break in her palm.

His hand crept around her breast, caressing the pert nipple between his fingers, and he bent to suckle the brown nub. A gush of wetness flowed over her, through her, the hunger gripping every sensation. No, she would not turn him away. She would welcome him closer until his body filled hers body and they were one. "Ailigean," she cried through a haze of sensuality. He lifted a dreamy expression at her call and waited patiently for her to speak, following words as though they drifted in the air. "Ailigean."

"Do ye still want me?" he teased, knowing full well the electricity that snapped between them, full well her hand still squeezed around him.

"Take it off," she purred. "Get under the covers."

Obedying, he slid from her touch and the bed, unbuckling the belt that held his kilt, then the shoes and the wool socks. His brown body twisted as his fingers manipulated the laces of her boots. With an expectant smile he rolled the stockings to her ankles, pausing to caress the smooth skin. Tickling his fingertips up the inside of her leg, he stroked the crease of silk panties, the only article of clothing left between them. She rolled away and pulled up the covers, disappearing beneath while wrenching the tiny undergarment from her body. And stretching her arms to him, he obeyed, not allowing the covers to hide a shyness which was rapidly dissolving.

With graceful gestures he maneuvered his whole bulk above her, his leg easing hers apart, but he denied touch, hovering over her on locked arms. Kate peered up at him, reaching to caress the swarthy skin of his neck, confirming the reality of the moment. She prayed he was not a luscious dream and that she wouldn't wake to find the image peering back at her only a whimsical cloud or drifting wisp of smoke.

His eyes were clouded with thoughts of pleasure, sensuality, and eroticism. The depth was bottomless and all she ached for was the chance to delve within, stay there forever, and drown in the beauty that flooded into her soul.

Their torsos so close she felt the ripple of heat that exuded from his waiting pleasure.

"Ye are mine now, Ceitag." His voice was low, raucous, seductive. He peered past her flesh and bone and blood. He enveloped her heart and mind with his words, delving deep into her being before even delving into her body. No man had looked through her like this; every secret, every thought, every breath belonged to him. He claimed it as his own and she relinquished to him willingly. "Take me as your own."



He lowered to her and at last their torsos met, pressing together.

Muscle to breast.

Dark skin against soft flesh.

But still he denied her pleasure. He asked her permission, again, with pleading eyes, not to repudiate his advance. He had to know she wanted more than simple needs of an act. Her permission involved a deeper want. He had to know she loved him and that he could, at last, give his guarded heart to the one who would treasure such a sacred gift for eternity.

"Yes," she promised. "You are my own." This arrogant man who had filled her with raw emotions of anger and hate and frustration and now this! She couldn't help but smile. Now she had gone to his bed and was welcoming every ruttish craving he evoked within her. "Yes," she repeated. "I am your own."

"Then take your hand," he whispered, "and guide me." His shoulders trembled slightly with the strain of his own weight. Or was it the weight of expectancy--a liberation of a heart tethered by multiple restraints, waiting to be released? She gasped at the very idea.

Sliding her hand under his arm, down the hard curve of his waist, his hip and to his groin--MacTavish pride, virility, eminence--hers for the taking.

Her eyes closed, she submitted to his power, guiding him to her, and at her urging, her permission, and guidance, he pushed. Farther, deeper, his virility more than she had imagined. A moment in time she barely believed could exist.

A sharp intake of breath and his hips lifted, only to fall back again. Instinct. Desire. Love. A moan, uttered from the depths, vibrated from him into her neck, its primeval sound coaxing her to throw her hips into him. She writhed and with the motion he clutched her breast, pawing fingertips to her flesh. Stunned between the sharp pain and the immense pleasure, she shrieked sharply, burying the sound into the neck that now glistened with a thin film of moisture. Her fingers scratched the vast muscle of his buttocks, pulling him ever deeper and inviting the thrusts to quicken.

He complied.

Kate's face was smothered into the wet hollow of his throat. His biceps wrapped firmly around her shoulders, she was indeed his. His scent melted into hers, his moans in unison with her clipped gasps, their bodies joined as one. And his power grew. Knees bent he writhed deeper, his whole body bouncing rhythmically with a growing climax.

"Ceitag," he cried through longing, as though in pain.

All misgivings vanquished, she succumbed to not only the acceptance of her new name, the name he had christened her with, but to the ecstasy he drew from her. Back arched, she threw her body to him and succumbed to the instant wave, one that filtered through her being and danced to his song of passion.

Bliss. She understood her life could never be the same.

And at her moan he thrust and broke within her. Fulfillment. Commitment. His heavy moan issuing a peace she had never experienced. His weight collapsed and she cradled him, clutching damp hair that clung to his skin in curls, and kissing the saltiness that seeped from hot flesh.

Slowly, his rocking subsided, but she would not let him go. She refused an ending.

Pulling the coolness of the sheet over his shivering back she clung to him,

keeping his heartbeat within her body. And sought his lips for another kiss. She found instead words.

*“Tha gaol agam ort, Ceitag.”*

“I love you, too, Ailigean.”

And now the world was a different place; they truly belonged to one another.

## Chapter Eleven

Kate woke slowly. She willed it to be that way. Curled beneath the covers with an unlimited supply of heat radiating from the sleeping body pressed against her, this was a cloud, and she had to float within it, just a little while longer.

Finally the call of the coffeemaker grew too strong. Kate eased carefully from beneath the limp arm that had embraced her most of the night. Thinking her escape successful, she was about to put her feet on the floor when a huge hand caught her waist and tugged her back under the covers. "Where do ye think ye're going?" One eye was focused on her, the other pressed into the oversized pillow.

Kate slid into the naked chest, and using her fingers as a comb, stroked the dark strands that had been jostled into odd angles. "I was going to make coffee," she answered, although now that he was awake the idea seemed secondary in importance.

"Coffee sounds good," he mumbled, pressing a kiss into her hair, "But a cuddle sounds better."

She was suddenly captive to the arms that squeezed her cheek into a sea of muscle and skin. A willing prisoner, she rubbed her hands up the expansive back, massaging his flesh while luxuriating in his embrace. "Um," he murmured. "That feels nice. Ye are verra clever with your hands, aren't ye?"

Kate could feel the blush crawl into her face. Not wanting him to see her flush she pressed her cheek harder against his shoulder. When he wiggled closer, he reminded her with his body why she had suddenly been shy. "Alex?" she whispered, her lips teasing the velvet earlobe.

He squirmed slightly at the tickle. "Aye?"

"Despite the fact that you and your friend are both awake, I really do think we should get straightened around and go."

Alex over-exaggerated a groan of regret. "I'm okay with that, but the wee lad willna understand." A broad grin erupted into a flash of white teeth and then a hearty laugh. When he took her into his arms again, she noticed for the first time a malevolent purple blotch soiling the soft tone of otherwise perfect skin on his right shoulder. The blemish was smooth but the shape rough, like a detailed map of a rugged coastline and when Kate reached to run her fingertip over the mark the surface puckered and then wrinkled before regaining its original shape.

"Alex. This scar on your shoulder...." She shuddered at the thought of fire and the intense pain of seared flesh. She was familiar with the results of carelessness, having tipped a pot of boiling water from the stove. Her leg was a flamethrower for almost a week, but the damage small, as she had managed to dodge most of the assault. But this covered most of his shoulder, hanging there like a noxious claw. How had she not seen the mark last night? "Is it a burn?"

"No," Alex answered. "Although sometimes it feels like one. It's a birthmark, or so I've been told."

Kate was lightly stroking the discolored skin. "What do you mean it sometimes

feels like a burn? How can a birthmark do that?"

"I dinna know." Alex twisted to glance at his shoulder, as though confirming it was still there. "Sometimes it gets hot."

"That's odd. Have you seen a doctor?"

"Och." He dismissed the subject with the guttural noise and pressed her back into the bed. "I had hoped when ye woke up this morning ye'd be a wee more interested in something other than my shoulder." His dark eyes widened with the insinuation. He pushed his hips against her thigh, inching one leg suggestively between her knees. "And we dinna have to go for awhile yet." Great warm palms stroked hair from her temples as his expression melted into a sultry urge for gratification. "Or have ye gone shy on me all of a sudden?" One corner of his mouth curled.

"I'm a Daniels, remember? We girls don't have a problem with humility."

"I'm a MacTavish, and we lads don't have a problem making sure they stay that way."

Kate gave a disgusted snort and playfully pushed him to one side. "No, I'm certain you don't. Now get off me, you animal, so I can make coffee. And if your 'wee lad' is disappointed then," she kissed the tip of his nose, "that's your problem, not mine."

Alex fell back into the pillow, watching her dress. "If ye weren't such a beauty, woman, I'd swear ye were a witch."

"Are you sure I'm not?"

"Nay. I'm ne'er sure about anything anymore, except that I'm in love with ye, Ceitag. And of that I'm verra sure."

\* \* \* \*

The torrents of rain politely held off until they were back at Kirkland Hall later that morning. Alex tucked the Morgan within the stables and changed out of his 'wedding' clothes before joining Kate. She was in the middle of a heated conversation with Mally when he breezed in, shaking drops of water from his jacket onto the stone floor of the foyer.

"I'm sorry," Kate continued to apologize, barely inching a word in edgeways. "Yes ... I know ... but..." Seeing Alex come in she held the phone out to one side and the piercing tone was clearly audible from across the room.

Kate whispered, "I wasn't here when she called last night and she says she was so worried it ruined her evening." Tipping her chin to the phone Kate firmly said, "Stop. Just shut up a minute and listen, would you?"

The squeak started again but Kate was persistent. Winking at Alex she said to the receiver, "I spent the night with Alex." With a chuckle she held the phone out, this time for him to hear the dead silence. He covered his mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" Mally sang out after recovering from the initial shock. "You old vixen, you!"

"You didn't give me the opportunity to tell you, and a little less of the 'old' please."

"Can you tell me anything or is he standing right there with you?"

"You don't really think I'm going to blurt out all the gory details, do you?" Kate shook her head while feigning an indignant tone. Actually, she would, she thought, but seeing Alex was indeed standing right there...

"I'd tell you," Mally protested.

"Then you first." Kate curled on the sofa. "I'm listening," she continued, hearing only a litany of splutters. "Just as I thought. So seeing you're on a new exercise program, how much weight have you lost?"

"Oh, that's bitchy," Mally laughed. "We'll take turns on the scales when I get back."

Kate pulled the duvet around her legs. The house felt as damp as the weather outside. "You do plan to grace us with your presence again?"

"Yes. In fact, I'll be bringing Tim with me. He has a week off and I thought it would nice for him to see our estate."

"Nice for him or for you?" Kate was beginning to have misgivings about another couple sharing the hall. Her relationship with Alex was a budding one, and three, to say nothing of four, was a crowd.

"I told him there were paranormal activities in the house and he's anxious to have a look-see."

"Oh, Mally! You didn't."

"Yeah, I did. Sis, it's what he does. Besides, I want to spend as much time with him as possible and I'm sure you know how *that* feels."

As much time as possible. Kate lifted her eyes to find Alex puttering around in the kitchen making them lunch. One passionate night together and they were making promises of commitment and love and shared lives. But at that time neither considered the fact her stay was temporary. This was merely a holiday, after all. There were specific dates on tickets reminding her eternity ended within a couple of weeks.

Kate pulled the blanket over her shoulders. She was suddenly very cold.

"Sis? Are you still there?"

"Um, yes, sorry. You were saying?"

"I said, I'm bringing Tim with me. I promise we won't cramp your style. In case I can't reach you again by phone, I'll say ta-ra for now and see you in a couple of days, all right?"

"Fine. See you then. Bye." Kate dropped the phone to the cradle and rubbed her aching forehead. Nothing compared to the pain she would experience when she left for real. And to think her suitcase sat upstairs packed and ready to go now. What a difference a day makes.

"Something wrong?" Alex's fingers dug into the tensed muscle of her shoulder and she slumped at the tingling relaxation his touch induced. "She have bad news?"

The last thing Kate wanted was despondency. "Oh, no," she answered, shaking off the onslaught of depression. "Unless bringing a parapsychologist with her is considered bad news."

Alex fell onto the couch and folded his arms around her chest, tipping his chin into her shoulder. "A what-psychologist?"

"Doctor Timothy Younger, or as she refers to him now, 'Tim'. He researches supernatural occurrences. Mally seems to have lured him into her net with stories about this place." She turned to sink her forehead into his collarbone. "They'll be here the day after tomorrow."

Alex strummed her arm like a harp. "What do ye know about him?"

"Not a great deal. Name, profession, and the fact he must be a very brave man to be seen in public with Mally." Her joke went missing in Alex's deluge of thought.

“And he studies the paranormal?”

“Yes. What a way to make a living, eh?”

Alex laughed. “I suppose it could be quite lucrative in this country. A few exaggerated stories and a showmanship type personality. Nothing new.”

“What’s happened here isn’t exaggerated, though, is it? If this doctor is for real, then this house should give him a run for his money.”

They sat without speaking, listening to the clatter of rain throwing a temper tantrum against the windowpane. Kate’s mood was worsening, despite the contentment of being in Alex’s tight hug. She wanted to stay there within the circle, forever.

His hand brushed her attention to him, away from thought, and into his eyes. They sparkled, hinting mirth within. She couldn’t help but to automatically return the gesture. “What?” she asked.

“I was thinking about the look on your face last night when ye realized ye were set up. It was a treat.”

“Laugh a minute,” Kate spit. “It wasn’t funny at the time, not after what I had seen you doing earlier.”

“Och, that was nothing.”

Kate straightened and glared at him, lips pressed firmly together. The strain was broken only when he started to tickle her armpits. “I mean it, Ceitag. Nothing.” He thrust her into his chest and sighed deeply. “I dinna want anyone but ye.”

It was on the tip of Kate’s tongue to say, ‘Until I leave.’ But she kept the misgiving to herself. “So you knew about the banquet?”

“Aye. Doug said Cindy were getting ye ready and we’d meet up at the hotel. He said ye were delighted with the idea.”

“Oh, did he now. Perhaps I should have words with your brother.”

“No, he’d only tease ye more, especially seeing we did, after all that spitting and arguing, spend the night together.”

“Guess I’m a sucker for a silvery tongue,” Kate said, sensing she should feel more annoyed with herself for giving in to his seduction so easily, but pleased with the end product, regardless. “I take it you planned on getting me upstairs all along?”

“No, I dinna think of it till ye refused to hear me out.”

Kate propped her weight on the heel of her hand to look directly into his face. “You didn’t reserve that room?”

Alex shook his head, a curl swept over dark skin. “The room’s an extra. I’ve stayed there before when I’ve been helping out and it’s gone late or I’ve had too much to drink. It’s usually available. I’m glad it was last night.” The memory massaged the smile from his mouth. “I probably shouldna say this....” His swallowed hard. “But when I’m with ye, I get this wonderfully delirious feeling that everything will be put right now. Everything. Like ye’re the final piece to a puzzle and....”

Kate kissed him, forcefully, deliberately, and devotedly. He gulped at the suddenness and then indulged her passion with his own, digging his fingers to her waist and holding her body close to his. His heart quickened, the telltale pulse bouncing in his neck, and she kissed the tender spot there while he moaned a soft sigh. “Oh, Ceitag,” he whispered. “Say that ye want me as much as I want ye.”

“You’re arrogant, and egotistical, and moody and sarcastic. I hate you.”

Alex’s heavy brow furrowed. “If that’s yer idea of sweet talk, then I see now why

ye're still a single lass."

"You treated me with contempt, Alex. You had a funny way of showing an attraction. It wasn't just me being overly sensitive."

"Aye, and I'm sorry. Would it help to know that I ached for ye? I still do." He winked and smiled mischievously. "And we have the whole afternoon alone, to do whate'er we want." His shoulders flexed. "I'm burning for ye as we speak."

Kate expected to see a now familiar teasing in his eyes, but instead found he was surrounding her, the hazy hush of seduction was again filtering through his voice, the gentle sweep of his hand, the pleasant gush of breath on her neck.

Why was she instantly malleable within his grasp? Last night her fervent anger had heightened her senses so acutely that when she gave in to his suggestive gestures the pleasure rocked her threefold. Now she was not angry, or suspicious, or frightened. Now she was struggling to conceal a growing salaciousness that shivered below her wavering exterior, and if he continued to kiss her, or touch her, or draw his lips even closer, that surface would scratch and her prudence would dissolve. Evaporate. Melt.

As it should. She hadn't felt so infatuated, so needy, so overcome, for a long time.

When he flickered his tongue down the curve of her throat and she smelled him, his scent wafting up from warm flesh and soft hair, she found her fingers fumbling the buttons of his shirt. Denial was not an option. For either. She wanted him. Closer. And she squirmed into the hands that now pulled at her clothes with urgency. No barriers between them now except small articles of clothing, which could easily and quickly be dispelled.

Kate moved to him so violently that he fell backward into the couch. His face framed by the pillow, he peered up, a confused smile tugged the corners of his mouth, and yet at the same time he appeared very much enthralled with her sudden burst of energy. "I'm sorry," she whispered, conscious of her boldness. "Girls aren't supposed to act like this, are they?"

"Says who? And do I look as though I mind?" Crossing arms behind his head he licked dry lips and grinned, "Consider me that empty room that needs decorating."

Kate surveyed the body that presented itself a willing sacrifice to her desires and her creative imagination, and that imagination was running wild and untamed. But could she let her imagination take control? His legs were long and lithe beneath his jeans, stomach flat and chiseled, peeping from behind the buttons she had already managed to wrench open. A vee of dark hair on his chest melted into that soft, warm, safe place between his collar bone and voice box. Her fingers inched under the shirt, walking step by step up and down the sensitive waist, and he squirmed at the tickling. His laugh was childlike, almost a giggle and she laughed, realizing only then that she had been unconsciously holding her breath.

The tickle soon developed into a wrestle, and when her body pressed down to his, and the laughter subsided, their eyes locked. "I need you," Kate whispered. "In every sense of the word. I need you." Her honesty frightening, she couldn't believe these exact words were tumbling from her lips. But she heard them. And so did he.

And his reaction was one of unbridled longing.

The dark face flushed, half-opened lids drifted into dream, and as he pulled her breast fully onto his, expert fingers had her shoulders bare. Teeth tugged the straps of her

bra down and with a slight lurch she bounced and was diving back into the heat of his flesh. Torsos naked, he was still pawing at her, and heavy breath filtered choking moans. Animated with a speed that made her dizzy, she relinquished imagination to his control. It didn't matter any longer who was seducing whom. As long as it happened. And soon.

Fingertips dug into her waist and she writhed at his massage, feeling the full extent of his excitement beneath his jeans. Experience. She knew what power he possessed and the way he could use it. He pressed her hips up and down, guiding them with huge hands; the very motion he knew made her remember. She pushed her pelvic bone into the hardened mound and ached, as he knew she would. A hot fist of lust thumped into her stomach. She spread her legs around him, and sat up, tensing her thighs so hard he obeyed the command to lay quietly beneath her, even though he still teased her with a slowly writhing pelvis.

His chest heaved as he studied her. "Tell me what ye think about, Ceitag. I want to know your fantasies so that I can make each and every one come true."

Privacy. He was delving deeper into quiet dark alcoves. Not only scanning every intimate place on her body, but he wanted the key to her mind. Fantasies. He was her fantasy, and how could she explain that logically?

"I don't have any..."

He leaned straight up to her and purred, "Then I shall give ye mine." His hands worked the button of her jeans. Pushing his fingers as far down as possible against her hips fighting the restrictions of denim, he continued to whisper. "Take it off, my beauty. And let me watch ye do so."

She clutched his shoulder blades as though she had suddenly lost her footing and needed his help to balance. "Alex, I can't."

"Ye dinna need to be shy, Ceitag. I want ye to be relaxed with me. I want to know all the places on your body that burn, all the words for your ear that will make ye wilt, and I want to taste every inch of ye. I must be the one who loves ye the most. My body must be the instrument of your pleasure. It must be!"

A waterfall crashed from her mind to her thighs as he spoke, the sensual flavor of his tone rippling her into motionlessness. Intoxicated by his voice, she wavered, and he clutched her tighter. Sensing her weakening he continued, "I have to know everything about ye. Promise to fill me with your life and your love. And I shall promise to give ye all that ye need, and want, and..." He fluttered wet kisses behind her ear, "and I shall draw out all your fantasies, because I know they're in there." He sank back into the couch and folded his arms again behind his head. And waited.

Two could play this game. This game she could enjoy.

Pressing the heel of each hand into his ribcage she leaned forward, skin, flesh, hair against her palm, higher to his shoulder and then the tensed muscle of his biceps. He unlocked his elbows raising his arms full length to let her single massage reach as far as thick wrists. Lips brushing past his throat, she heard the strangled moan from within, and in slow motion reached his ear and whispered, "My fantasy is lying here beneath me right this very moment. And I'm thinking about how good he feels inside my body."

Her key. And from this box an animal released. Teeth exposed by curled lip, sinew rippled beneath skin, hunger danced in flashing black eyes that focused dead on her, and the place of feeding was her lips. His hands clamped each side of her head, holding her gaze for one second, to tell her with his silent stare that the animal within him



would mate, and mate for life. She had been chosen, chased, wooed and marked. And although he had shown the capability to be tender, soft and kind, now it was time to be raw, basic, and ... crazed.

Alex thrust his shoulders up to meet her, forcing his mouth to hers with such ferocity it drew her breath. His tongue reached every crevice, gliding around her teeth, suckling her lips as he withdrew. She tried to catch breath but he continued to suck her dry, as though feeding on her very existence, as though telling her his tongue symbolic of other pleasures he had to offer, other private places he could search out within her body, and intrude. And give even more pleasure. As long as she gave of herself in return.

His growing fervor rocked her mind. A voice within her head screamed to react, claw, and bite. Take him.

Wrenching from his pawing she shed her clothes while lust-laden eyes watched her. Goosebumps swept over her breasts, stomach and thighs, and on he watched with pained stillness as she reached for his zipper--the only thing between her and ... him. Digging her nails into the belt loops, she yanked the jeans over his hips and down. And his eyes widened as he continued to watch.

On all fours, the animal she had become, the animal he had made her, she crawled. She pursed her lips to touch his knee, quickly stroking the sensitive spot behind with the tip of one nail. She heard a sharp intake of air and as her tongue traced a hot, wet path through the hair of his thigh. He arched slightly to meet her, head pressing back into the pillow, fists gripping the material of the couch, his groin shivering with expectancy.

She smiled wryly as she continued to crawl higher, erect nipples all that brushed his hard flesh, and he snarled, lids closed, lips curled contorting his reddened face. "Ye-are-a-witch," he spit. "And I hope ye burn the way ye make me burn."

Fire within her body was not a terror she would flee. That fire was a delicious storm and she relished its lurid heat as it lapped her limbs and her belly and her breast. And there was only one way to extinguish the flame....

Circling each of his nipples with her tongue, tenderly pulling them in turn between her teeth and suckling, she teased, and tormented, and listened as he sighed approval, and shivered to control an instinct to lunge and overpower. Her tongue flickered up the smooth skin of his neck; he turned to let her follow her desires and moaned as she carefully lapped his earlobe. The passage to his mind, she was at the gates, and her weapon--words.

"Lover," she heaved heavy breath. "My fantasy. Still want to hear my fantasy?"

The muscle of his neck and jaw contracted as he swallowed, and then whimpered, "Yes," so low she almost missed hearing.

"I want to cast a spell. You are frozen, without thought or movement, unless I grant approval, and then only to pleasure me. And when our union is complete and we moan our last breath together, I make you very small, a round smooth pebble, and I slip you into my pocket so that my fingers can always caress you, and when I can no longer bear being without you, I'll put the pebble to my lips, kiss it, so that you will grow and grow and burst only to my making." She wrapped her fingers around his excitement, the full extent of a hammering heart pulsating to her palm. "And then you have no choice but to make love to me again."

He tried to look into her face but a sexual tremor held him paralyzed. "Ceitag,"

he croaked harshly, his words catching. "Don't make me wait longer. I canna bear the torment."

Dominance. Submission. She had tamed this creature she had first seen running wild upon the moors. Now, he was quivering at her power and she relished her new role.

Stretching her legs over his hips she settled closer to his groin, guiding him with one hand. This moment, hovering close, deep yearning, was so poignant, so intimate, so passionate that Kate struggled to see confirmation of her own feelings in his misting eyes, and she saw again their depth, and the place she now held there, in his soul.

And with one long luxurious slide she was a part of him.

He blinked once, lashes fluttering to eyes now rolled into his head. His hands groped for her hip bones and once found, sturdy fingers ground into her flesh, forcing her to bounce in rhythm to his short masterful lurches. Then harder. And then faster.

"Tell me," he whispered, his tongue thick with sensual stupor. "Tell me how it feels."

"I hurt," she answered.

His tempo immediately slowed, altruism prominent. Yet there was pride sweltering in his chest. "My revenge," he smiled. "Ye are condemned to hurt more." His rhythm quickened again.

Tiny darts of euphoria tickled within her. "I can't stop this," she gasped, bracing for inevitable ecstasy. "It's too fast!"

"Nay, my beauty. Let it go. Don't fight. Let me know that my body pleases ye."

And the sensation of his mastery splintered through her very core. Weakened by a climax so intense, she lost balance and fell to his chest with a whimper borne from astonishment. Her valiant attempt to drive him to the outer edges of eroticism and beyond had backfired, and now she was his instrument, weakened, helpless and vulnerable to whatever he chose to do with her lifelessness.

Her breast pushed into his large frame, waiting for her heart to ease, he writhed slowly within, holding, waiting, calming, but refusing to let go. "Now my wee witch," he said. "Now I shall tell ye my fantasy...."

Kate held the ball of his shoulder in her palms, resting her weary neck against his chest, listening to his ability to keep a heart from coursing too much blood, too quickly. He was the master of his own body, and now the master of hers.

"Ceitag. My fantasy is that ye come with me when I go to Hell's gate. Hold my hand and kiss me before I have to go. And wait, because if ye're not there for me to come back to, I might as well stay."

Kate lifted her head to peer into eyes brimming with awe. What sort of fantasy was this?

"Ye have no idea how much I wish I could be that wee pebble ye talk of." His arms now swooped her into his chest and he writhed again, inflamed with the softness of human contact, comfort, and promise.

Her womb tightened to hold him closer.

"Ye say ye need me," he moaned, balking slightly to control the sensation. "Nay near as much as I need ye."

"We have each other now," she consoled, but wasn't sure of the implications. It simply had to be said.

He hardened even more, and with a shudder his lids closed, shielding his thoughts

behind a curtain. And when she bore down on him, ever so slightly, his lips cracked. "Finish what ye started, Ceitag," his voice hoarse. "Before my heart leaps from me."

His need now was to find satisfaction and she worked with growing delirium towards total closeness, and total fulfillment. His. The strain to hold on as long as possible etched across the muscles of his face and neck, and a cry issued from constricted vocal cords told her his mind was centered not on words, or promises or fantasy, but on the all consuming need to release the ache in his groin, and bathe her with his immense pleasure for as long as nature would allow.

Small circles and then violent bounces. The shock manifested in his face, eyes snapped open to find the source of his ecstasy, and as he burst a powerful release of liquid heat, his cry reminded her of the animal who had chosen her as his mate. Each exhalation the cry lessened, the steel beneath his skin relaxed, and the heart eased the pulse in the thick, moist flesh of his neck.

She stretched gently over him while he cradled her, the animal fading, the man returning. Strumming her back and shoulders as though she were a musical instrument, a moment too precious to lose, she kissed the throbbing hollow of his throat, trying to think of a word that could make time stop and keep them together, forever.

Time. Marked with calendars. Weeks, months, the steady marching of years into ... centuries. Lost in time. How would it feel, other than impenetrable, heavy and without hope?

Lulled by the gentle rain against the window, Kate closed her eyes and drifted. This was a perfect place, with Alex, safe in his arms, his masculinity enrapturing her still. A perfect place....

A shriek, high pitched and blood curdling, ripped the air.

Alex reacted instantly by thrusting her body to one side and crawling protectively over her, throwing bewildered eyes towards the foyer where the scream seemed to originate. Every muscle again sprang to life, but the motivation was the need to defend. His wide eyes refused to blink as he continued to watch and wait, but nothing stirred, or called, or screamed.

"What the hell was that?" Kate whispered harshly. The scream was bad enough but Alex's reaction had sent every nerve ending bounding back to life. Her flesh crawled, despite the heat of his sheltering chest.

"We're sorry," he called out softly. "Please, forgive us."

Kate swung mortified eyes to Alex who was still peering to the ancient hall. "Who are you talking to? Who's out there?"

"Ssh," Alex commanded. "Wait." He shifted his weight yet continued to shield her body from some invisible force that only he had witnessed. She did as he demanded and waited, while his anticipation flowed like riveting bolts of pending danger.

"They sense our love," he whispered matter-of-factly. "It's what they had and what they lost, and have struggled to find. They felt us and I guess it was more than they could bear. Did the scream sound like a woman's to you?"

Kate was mortified. How could he speak so calmly about this as though two angered people actually stood in the doorway, chastising *them* for making love to each other in full view? "What?" she asked, the visual inconceivable.

Alex smiled, an eerie smile, as though realizing he was nearer to accomplishing some great, impossible feat. "She's here, as well. Katrina. She's come back." He

reached to Kate's hand and squeezed it fiercely. "The gates of Hell have begun to open, Ceitag, and I'm no certain I'm ready yet."

## Chapter Twelve

Unsure exactly how or to what depth ghost sightings and Scotch whiskey were related, Kate was beginning to personally experience both, and in that order. She unscrewed the cap with trembling hands and listened as Alex's weight fell on floorboards within the main house. His courage in padding through a place filled with voices, smells and now shrieks, amazed her. She had made a silent pact to herself to see only the foyer, and that was because she had to get to the doors and the trip would be accomplished with lowered eyes.

"Thanks a bunch, Mr. Campbell," she complained. "You could have exorcised the place before leaving it to me in a will." She gulped the clear gold liquid and was hastily pouring another when Alex returned.

Clearly disappointed he slumped onto the couch and took the glass she offered. "I did not expect to see anything, but this is the first we've heard of her." He sipped the drink, distracted with meditation. "Nay," he muttered. "This is a first. I hoped she would show herself to me."

"You *want* to see them?" The thought sent a shudder down Kate's spine.

"I've seen him often enough. She's here because ye're here," Alex said as though it were scientific fact.

"She's obviously not too thrilled with me, then." Kate was still having a great deal of difficulty coping with this. Unexplained events had no place in her logical black-and-white world.

Alex shook his head. He was listening after all. "That's no it. She's frustrated." Between the whiskey and Alex's relaxed demeanor Kate was calming down. "She hasna been with her man for five hundred years. Maybe she's *really* frustrated."

"Oh, good grief," Kate scowled. "Leave it to you to say that! You think all women are the same, ghost or not."

"Aye. Aching for it. I told ye, Daniels are all the same."

Something in his downcast glance made Kate think twice about carrying the joke further. "What's going on here, Alex? You haven't told me the whole story yet."

"Come and sit beside me, my beauty. I need to feel ye close to me."

Taking the duvet with her to his side, she felt a bit like a child curling next to a favorite storyteller and waiting with wide eyed expectancy for a tale of mystery, adventure, and the unexplained. But this storyteller coaxed her to draw close and cupped her head to his chest and kissed her hair before beginning.

"As far as Jimmy and I could figure, Dougal MacTamhais has haunted this property since his death. We found journals here and diaries, records families kept, and in almost every one there's a mention of the horseman on the moors, the smell of smoke but no fire, footsteps up the stairs and whoever had the misfortune of staying in the bedroom off the landing experienced unusual dreams."

The bedroom. "Why is it still furnished and the rest of the house is so empty?"

"Jimmy wanted me to leave it that way for as long as possible after his death. I'm

not sure why, except he spent a lot of time there and was aware of the deep feeling. He may have thought that room was the house's heartbeat. I'm no sure. I just did as he asked. Why?"

The voices, the sadness, the plea for help. "I felt them, too. Keep going."

"He said he had become obsessed with trying to find a way to appease the spirit who lived here, and try as he might he could nay do it. He saw the ghost of Dougal, even took hold of his kilt once, but then the vision would disappear. Jimmy said he never got to see the face. It wasna there."

"But he never saw Katrina?"

"Nay. Nor heard her call out. That's something new. Then, not everyone sees Dougal either. There was no mention of him for about fifty years during the mid nineteenth century while a family by the name of Claymont lived here. Then a Jonathan Campbell bought it, a distant relative of the original Campbells, and Dougal was back. Seems he favors relatives, even those through marriage."

"I saw him," Kate declared. The purple moor, bright moon and the gallant horse. The whole scene drifted through her mind.

"Aye, I know ye did, and when ye told me I was more than surprised. It was then I realized ye had more of a claim to Kirkland Hall than I first suspected."

"Oh? How's that?"

"Jimmy did a lot of research into his family. Found birth and death records that dated as far back as 1743." Alex crossed his legs and snuggled her tighter. "Before that it's rather hit and miss. There was a fire in the wee church and they lost a lot of documents. But as far as he could figure, after Dougal's death the house was left in ruins for some time, until the Campbells came back and started living here again. Relatives of the first wife. Except for that fifty years there's been a Campbell here ever since."

"Why didn't the MacDaniells want it?"

"They thought it cursed. We Scots take that sort of thing personally." He leaned to pour another drink. "And I wonder if there's some truth to it. Few men have had successful relationships. Jimmy died a bachelor, and others lost their wives through illness, or madness."

Kate shivered. "And now you want to live here? You're not superstitious?"

Alex laughed. "Well, I wouldna go that far. I haven't been blessed with fortune in that area either." He squeezed her waist. "Till now. Jimmy used to tell me that if a MacTavish had the place maybe Dougal could be pacified. Maybe I could have more success in appeasing the loneliness here and as a result break the curse, so Dougal can rest. I dinna know. Then ye came and ye can sense what's going on. I'm beginning to wonder if Jimmy knew that somehow, between the two of us, we could settle this once and for all." After a pause he chuckled, "Sly ol' devil that he was."

"Fate," Kate sighed. "Him and my father being friends during the war. And if it's true that my ancestry could be traced back to here. Gives me the willies."

"And fate that brought us together? Aye, I'm a believer now. I just hope fate will be gracious enough to keep us together."

Wanting to stay in the past for a while longer Kate asked, "Whatever happened to Katrina?"

"Not sure. After Dougal's brother Malcolm killed Bruce MacDaniells, she took her bairn and went to live with him. Malcolm's home wasna far from here. Gone now--

there's nothing left--but as the story goes he treated the child as one of his own. On the boy's fourteenth birthday, the anniversary of Dougal's death, she wandered away and disappeared."

"How sad."

"Aye, I agree. And if ye are to believe all the stories, they've been searching for each other ever since."

"Do you believe?"

"All I know for certain is what my gut tells me. There's a great unhappiness between these walls and the torch has been passed. I have to solve the problem once and for all, or else I'm doomed as well. And I canna do it without your help."

Kate shifted to look his straight in the face. "The gates of hell?"

He nodded. "I'm verra pleased this friend of your sister's is coming."

The rain had stopped but the fog outside was ending the daylight prematurely. Kate was suddenly acutely aware of the darkness creeping into the room. She had deliberately kept from looking into the hall and now the mood in this warm nest was becoming heavy. She was very grateful not to be alone. "In the meantime, what should we do?" The scream echoed through her mind.

Alex stroked her arm and, lost in thought, brought her wrist to his lips and kissed it. Finally, he rolled dark eyes to her and said, "I think we should spend the night in that bedroom."

Kate wrenched her hand away in shock of the very suggestion. "You must be joking," she scolded. "That's the last place I want to go."

"Nay. No joke." There was a solemn urgency in his whisper. "I'm no keen either, but they won't hurt us, Ceitag. They're trying to reach out for us to help them, and maybe if we slept there they would speak to us in our dreams."

"Or drive us mad with fright!"

Long fingers were squeezing her wrist again. "Hold my hand, Ceitag. We can do this together."

"Oh, dear Lord," she muttered. "All I wanted was a short holiday to relax and enjoy a change of scenery. Now this!"

"Then ye'll do it?" his voice quavered with expectancy. "Ye'll make my fantasy come true?"

She brushed back a lock of dark hair from his temple. "I had to fall for a man with the weirdest fantasies on the face of the earth."

"Then this dream is true?" he smiled, compressing one corner of his mouth. "Ye do love me?"

"Yes, Ailigean. I do love you."

"Then half my battle is over." And with that he pulled her into his arms and held on as though his very life depended on it.

\* \* \* \*

Armed with a flashlight and a rolling pin, Kate turned to Alex and said, "Okay, I'm ready."

"What are ye going to do, Ceitag?" he laughed. "Blind them first and then swing at their heads?"

"If it helps, yes." Kate didn't see the humor in the situation.

"Ye dinna half make me laugh," he chuckled.

“Well, I’m glad one of us is having a good time. But I’ll tell you what, I happen to be scared out of my wits.”

“We’ll take this,” he said, lifting the flashlight from her grasp. “But I can safely say we will no be needing this.” The rolling pin was placed back in the kitchen drawer. Thick ruddy brows lifted. “Do ye want to slip into your wee nightie before we go to bed?”

“Alex. I’m not even going to take my shoes off. If I have to run screaming from this building I want protection from the elements.”

“Aye, I’ll have to contain my urges then?” He winked.

“Maybe I should take the rolling pin after all.”

His playful mood didn’t help Kate’s anxiety. She hesitated at the bottom of the stairway, the darkness above looming malevolently down at her, as though daring her to take another step. Alex took her hand and gently pulled her along. “Come, my brave wee lass. Ye’ll be fine. I’m here to protect ye.”

“Why do I find that less than comforting? And why can’t we turn the lights on? It’s so dark.”

“And risk scaring them away?”

“Scaring *them*? Och, we dinna want to that now, do we?” she mimicked Alex’s accent.

The broad shoulders beneath the material of his shirt shook with a quiet chuckle and she continued to follow, stumbling on the top step, unaware they had finally reached the landing. Kate blinked at the unexpected white light that flashed on within the bedroom. When she finally focused she looked up to see a smirk. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Aye,” he said. “I’m beginning to.”

Kate rolled a dubious eye to Alex. “I better not find out this is all a sadistic trick of yours. If you’ve brought me up here to laugh at my fraying nerves, I’ll never forgive you. I still haven’t unpacked, you know.”

His face changed suddenly as though he suspected her teasing to be based on an element of truth. “No jokes, I promise. And tomorrow ye shall unpack.”

He went to the canopied bed and pushed the curtains aside, tying each corner with the burgundy cords. Then he meticulously turned down the quilted spread, revealing a wool blanket and cotton sheet beneath. “Do ye want to get in the bed or were ye serious about sleeping with yer shoes on?”

“Who’ll sleep? No, I’ll get under, but I’m not getting undressed.”

She made her way round to the other side and fluffed a rather lumpy looking pillow. The mattress was comfortable, however, and Kate settled surprisingly well, considering the circumstances. With Alex maybe this adventure wouldn’t be so bad. Without him, of course, she wouldn’t be here at all.

He crouched in front of the chest at the bottom of the bed, the oak top obscuring him from view as he rummaged about. The hinges complained when the lid closed again. And in his hand he held candlesticks, one of which was placed on the mantle and the other found a spot near his pillow on the bedside cabinet.

A burst of sulfur tickled her nose. The small flames flickered in an unfelt draft and then steadied. If they were at peace, then so was the room. Kate slunk down on the bed. This was actually becoming quite cozy. And romantic.



“Have you ever stayed in this room before?” she asked, playfully patting the blanket beside her.

Alex kicked off his shoes and stretched out full length beside her. She wasted no time huddling into the warmth of his shoulder as he wrapped one arm around her. “Aye. Once or twice.”

“And?” She adjusted a few times before finding that one small curve near his collarbone that fit her cheek so well.

“Well what?”

“Did anything happen?”

“No.” He sounded disappointed. “Except for having unusual dreams. But that’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

“What did you dream?” She pulled the blanket up. Between it and Alex’s body she was lovely and warm. The candle flame danced occasionally, making the flowers on the tapestry look as though they were swaying in a summer breeze.

“It’s hard to explain. Nothing really happened. It was more a feeling. Like being completely immersed in water but being able to breathe. It was all so....”

“Comfortable?” Kate asked, remembering a similar sensation.

“Aye, that’s right. Comfortable. But not just physically, emotionally as well. In some ways it was very erotic. Like this afternoon, after ye made love to me.” The thumping in his chest quickened slightly. “Now that I think about it, Ceitag, it was the same feeling. A peaceful fulfillment. Love. I dreamt about love in this room, and now I have that love in my arms.” His heart hammered a steady pump now. “That’s why I’m not afraid to be here, as long as ye are with me.”

A sobering lull, Kate closed her eyes, comforted by the steady rise and fall of his chest against her ear. She sensed the rumble in his throat before he even spoke. “Ye awake?” he whispered softly.

“Yes,” she whispered in return, matching his gentle tone.

He slid down so that his huge feet nearly jutted out over the chest at the bottom of the bed. Pulling her head closer to his neck, he had only to bend with minimum effort to kiss her forehead. She felt his voice box vibrate. “Have ye been in love before?”

Ghosts of a different sort drifted through her mind. “Yes, I suppose I was. Last time he asked me to marry him and then ran off.”

“I’m glad,” Alex mumbled, oblivious to her attempt to derive a bit of sympathy from that once pathetic situation. “I mean, otherwise ye would no have found me.”

Her lids drifted shut. Yes, she thought. So true. But she didn’t say anything out loud.

“Do ye know me well enough to love me? I mean, truly. Can it happen this fast? I only ask because I’m new at this.”

“Yes. Love can hit like a rock through your skull.” She smiled. That’s exactly what she had wanted to do when she had first met him.

“Ye should have been a poet, Ceitag. A song writer at the verra least.” He started picking through her hair, like a grooming monkey.

“What are you doing?”

“Lookin’ for the hole the rock made. But I dinna see one.”

“Alex, are you going to chatter away all night? If so, we might as well go back downstairs.”

“I canna help it, Ceitag. I have to know these things.”

The flame spluttered. Kate swept a glance around the dark corners of the room, but nothing stirred. Pacified, she settled back against her warm, breathing blanket. The rocking motion began to sedate her again. Just as she was thinking how amazing it was that she had been so frightened earlier and now she was on the verge of drifting off, when....

“Ceitag?”

Her whole body flinched. Eyes owl wide, she propped up on one elbow and glared at the handsome man beside her. “Ailigean.”

“What? Why did ye say my name like that?” He looked genuinely baffled.

“Why did we come up here?” she asked sternly.

“Did ye forget already?”

“No. I didn’t. But I was wondering if maybe you forgot. I was nearly asleep, believe it or not, twice. And you woke me up with your talking.”

“Oh. It’s working then. I mean, me soothing your frayed nerves.” He stifled a smile by running his finger under his nose, twitching it like a rabbit. “Tell me once more ye love me, and I’ll be quiet.”

“Once more, I love you.”

And as she finally drifted off to sleep her last memory was that both arms had surrounded her with a most marvelous and ... comfortable feeling

*Life and happiness lie here together, side by side. Comfort. Love.*

*‘I have ne’er felt like this before.’ Behind the words, a heart. Abject helplessness within his arms. No other way. Path of desire. ‘Dougal’.*

*His touch. Hand on breast; lips against neck; breath in hair. Natural passion. Hers. His.*

*Movement within her body. The child. Hears his father’s voice, feels his touch.*

*Desire is overwhelming. Want to feel him, on me, around me, in me. My love.*

*‘No, Dougal. Hold me close but think o’ the child.’*

*Bravery. Loyalty. Not just here. Not just one family but another family. A clan. Duty. Obligation.*

*No! Panic. Pleading. Don’t go. Stay here. ‘I need ye. Dinna go.’*

*Utterly alone. Nothing. Voices. Shouting. Pain. Every single moment, over and over, pictured in the mind. Fire. Smoke. And being wrenched away.*

*Trick. Revenge. Death. Then the blood in the snow. Obliterated. Her heart was gone to him. Their souls united except she still breathed.*

*The child. His baby is coming now. Too soon. Must protect the child.*

*Her physical presence gone. Without him, it does not matter. Stand alone. Wait. He will come. He promised death would not stop him.*

*I believe. Believe.*

*Love. I’m lost. Dark. Cold. Help me.*

The tears being swept away by her own hand woke her. Kate blinked in twilight and overwhelmed with the sadness of her dream, turned to find comfort from Alex.

“Alex?” The space beside her was empty. Not only that, it was cold. The candle had been blown out, or died out, ages ago. She started to sit up. “I must have slept well, despite the....” Who was she talking to? Someone was standing at the window. Who?

The huge frame blocked most of the twilight, standing sentinel, refusing permission, guarding, watching something or someone outside in the garden. Quiescent. The broad shoulders and back motionless, transmitting a signal of the unnatural. Inside and out. But not him. He had to be there.

“Alex?” Kate whispered. The name echoed across the room and then was sucked into nothingness.

Colors dull except for a hint of red in the kilt. Material shimmered despite its lack of movement. Heavy pleats, and a cape--no, a sash, thrown over his shoulder, mostly hidden by a massive cascade of black ringlets that fell straight down his back. The arms were bare. White flesh against the material, the darkness, the sorrow. One hand gripped a sword. The gold handle of a long, thin, silver sword. Frozen, like a photograph. But real. Three-dimensional.

Kate inched her feet to the floor. Like a hunted animal, slowly moving further from impending death. But she was drawing closer. Magnet. Helplessly closer.

No air. She could not take air into her lungs even if she could remember how. There was nothing in this place but her and him, and the pounding silence that transfixed them in two separate worlds, yet threw them together.

Not breathing, nor thinking, nor blinking, slow motion. Put one foot in front of the other. She circled, mesmerized.

The shutters were open. He was watching something below. The silhouette of his chin tipped down. Silence. It wafted all around him. There was no air to carry the sound, nothing for his lungs. He was beyond needing for the body. Only the soul.

Kate crept closer, a tiny mouse, sneaking nearer to a giant. No squeaks. Don't disturb him. But to get closer she might be able to touch him. Or see his face.

Hand extended, her muscle felt like lead. Shaking. Fear. Alex, please. Let it be Alex....

The sash, the tip of a long strand of hair, and she felt the silk when the space shattered, breaking into a thousand stabbing particles of light. A snap of electricity rocketed up her arm. Simultaneously the figure shimmered, like a quivering ripple of water to the sudden plop of a pebble on the surface. And as she reeled backwards to a strangled scream, he turned.

A burst of white erased the room, the window, everything except him. His massive form glowed black against it, expanding larger. Featureless face yet empty sockets threw one anguished look, a gap where the mouth should be dropped at a voiceless call. A blast of icy air blew through her body and automatically she closed her eyes to the onslaught. And by the time she regained balance after the stumble and opened her eyes, he was gone.

“Katrina!”

Kate whirled around, dizzy, stunned by shock, and gripped the window ledge, peered down and screamed again. Someone was outside, kneeling in the gravel, writhing in pain.

“Alex!” she shrieked.

She fled the room barely aware her feet touched the steps. An early morning gust of cold air swept over her shoulders as his crumbling body grew closer. Tears of panic streaked her face but she found the strength to move, run, her legs sticks of jelly.

“Alex!”

His eyes were open but vacant. He stared at a ghastly image beyond her, something only he could see. The garden was empty. Nothing was there, and slowly, the light was draining from his black pools, his anguished expression frozen into his cheeks like a chiseled stone statue of death.

She slid into the gravel, kneeling beside him. "Dear God, Alex!"

He clutched his throat with both hands, his dry lips silently gaping, transfixed on the vision she could not see. And the flesh of his shoulders glistened with the dampness of the mist, except for the scar--its color a deeper red, blotched, tender. A putrid odor of burning flesh wafted from the blistered skin.

Kate froze, wanting to reach out and hold him, but revulsion held her in a firm grip. Blood seeped from between his fingers on his throat, trickling a deathly path down his chest. He teetered, eyes rolled into heavy lids, and the voice cried softly, "Death will no keep me from finding ye again."

He fell toward Kate and she clutched at his arms, trying to see the gash that must have ripped across his throat, but his lifeless weight was too powerful. And when she held him, the mark on his shoulder no longer raw, but simply a scar, and the blood evaporated, gone, she saw he was naked, his whole body doubled, shivering in growing convulsions as he knelt into her.

Beyond shock, beyond fear, she found a strength of her own and pulled him to his feet. He obeyed, swaying with unsteady feet, knees buckling she lead him on, past the outer corners of the building, pausing only to grip the muscle that strained against her, yet trembled to go on. "Move," she heard her word, from behind, beyond, urging him on with desperation. "Keep moving!"

The stables. Safely away from the garden, the house, the terror, she kicked the heavy door and it swung sympathetically open to allow them inside to safety. Staggering a few more steps she dropped him onto his bed and he curled away, legs drawing up tightly into his chest. His skin was cold, and he convulsed, moaning softly with waves of shock. Kate grabbed the blankets, wrapping them over his nakedness, tucking them closer to dispel the cold and the tremors.

She pushed strains of wet hair from his temple. As though a signal, his lids fluttered, his confused eyes opened and rolled towards her. His voice deep and cracked with exhaustion he whispered to her, but she could not understand. Crawling under the covers beside him she pressed her arms around his shivering flesh and rubbed to heat the cold spots and he clung to her, his chest rising and falling in the beginning throes of weeping.

Kate cradled his face to her breast, gently rocking reassurance. Hot tears bathed her bosom and she continued to stroke his hair and offer small words of condolence. "Okay, now," she pleaded, hoping each would appease her trembling as well. "It's okay. You're safe here."

Fingertips dug into her shoulder blades as he wept, releasing the hell that had been trapped within his mind, gasping for deliverance. "Ceitag," he called softly, relaxing slightly. She could feel the muscles soften from her soothing. "Ceitag."

"Ssh. I'm here. It's okay. You're safe."

"He was in my head," Alex moaned, the pain evident still. "I felt what he felt. I saw what he saw. I was there."

She rocked him harder, held him closer. A nightmare. It had to be a nightmare.

Sanity demanded it. "Don't speak, Alex. It's over."

He shuddered with increasingly violent spasms. "I'm so cold."

His hands were like ice, his skin clammy to her touch. Kate rolled over and tore her own clothing off. Then she slid under the blankets, covering as much of his body as she could, her own body heat seeping into him. Sighing, his trembling eased, although the steel beneath her was hard, tension draining slowly.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, pushing his chin into her neck.

She laughed nervously. "You have nothing to be sorry about."

"No," he moaned. "Ye dinna understand. I need to take ye. And I am sorry, but I must."

"Ssh, Alex. You have had a traumatic nightmare, but it's over now. You're fine." But she felt the arousal growing in him, replacing the anguish. Firestorm was stirring and he was desperate to hold on to the heat, dispelling the cold that had had such a grip on his soul.

"I'm sorry," he repeated and with a mighty heave her back was being pressed into the cool sheets. His whole taut form was pushing down onto her. "Please dinna hate me for this."

His arms squeezed to her sides, pinning her motionless. She struggled beneath with a short shriek. He threw his mouth at hers and she tasted the tears that had washed across his face mingled with his tongue, felt his quaking shoulders bear harder into her, and when he left the heat of her mouth he reared up, telling her with a stark frightened gaze that he had to violate her body and he could not control the act.

There was madness within his head. She stared at the black windows that peered back into her and was still staring in disbelief when he wrenched her legs apart with his knee and was still staring when he thrust his swollen need deeply into her.

Sweet luxury. Her breast flushed with warmth of the intrusion, her thighs spread to give him permission, space to maneuver within. If this would exorcise the demon she would not deny him. She could not.

"Oh, Ceitag," he groaned, regret oozing from his graveled voice.

"If you need this," she sighed into the pulsating tendons in his neck, "I will give. Don't be sorry. Take what you need."

Relief flooded from every pore. He collapsed, the weight full against her. To reassure him with more than words she threw her hips to great his pleasuring. And he lunged, hardening further in the deep folds of her welcome.

Balling the material of the pillow in flexing fists, he writhed into her with growing force, the tension creasing his forehead with sweat. His thrusts squeezed her breath through her breast, into her throat where it pooled before escaping as short grunts. Through the haze she watched his torso rise to gather force and fall, hard and direct, his intention manifested by contorted outbursts of nearing joy.

Huge palms cupped her head. "I'm sorry," he cried, "I canna wait for ye."

Kate threw her nails into the moist flesh of his waist, arching her back to his quickening. "Let go. It's okay." But the intensity of his palpitation had already induced a darting wave, streaming from her mind in a tidal flow of bliss. She clawed his back, signaling she, too, was to be pacified by the monstrous need he pounded into her.

Freedom. Exoneration. He cried out, relinquishing all that held him fast in the darkness of torture. The demons that had gripped his mind were drowned. Her body was

the solace he demanded, and she, a willing sacrifice to whatever his heart ached to obtain. And as every muscle relaxed he grew limp, falling to one side, but close enough to hold on, keeping her tight to his easing breath.

“Love ye,” he whispered, and as she caressed his cheek his lids fluttered, he fell into a deep sleep.

“Only you,” she whispered back to deaf ears. Drenched with satisfaction and unstoppable loyalty she cradled his head to her breast. “My love. I will never let you go.”

## Chapter Thirteen

A searing pain in Alex's temple rendered him temporarily motionless. His nerves were raw as he dug trembling fingertips into the bridge of his nose and rubbed the hammering throbbing. A clock nearby was far too loud and light was already searing through closed eyelids. Mustering will power and brute strength, he rolled over in the bed and opened one dry eye.

"What happened?" he asked the figure that sat pressed tightly against his leg.

"I was hoping you could tell me."

Alex inched one foot from under the covers with the intention of putting both on the floor. Falling back into the pillow with a short groan he said, "Give me another minute," and closed his eye again. He groped blindly for the softness of the body he knew to be within reach.

Kate took his hand, her fingers stroking his wrist compassionately. "You haven't moved for six hours. I was beginning to worry."

He sensed the trepidation not only in her words but in the caress. "I'm okay," he appeased. "I just feel sore all over." With a weak smile he added, "What did ye do to me last night?"

"I could ask the same. Don't you remember?"

Faint images stirred in the corners of his mind, teasing Alex's memory with a sensation of cold and loss and total abandonment. He shivered and pulled his shoulders up against the pillow. The delicious smell of coffee coaxed his eyes to open for earnest, and as he enjoyed the heat from the mug in his hands he peered anxiously to Kate. "No," he said, for the first time realizing they were in the stables, and he was naked beneath the blankets. "I don't."

Kate seemed to wither. Her forehead was crinkled with concern and her shoulders slumped with a sigh soaked in defeat. "We spent most of the night in that bedroom."

"Oh, aye. Ye wanted to take a rolling pin." A spark started the memory. "How did we get here?"

"I saw him," Kate whispered, locking her eyes into Alex's face. "I woke and you weren't there. I thought it was you standing in the window, but it was him."

The cup was frozen to Alex's bottom lip as she spoke. A tremor fluttered down his spine. He had no recollection of any of this and listened with morbid fascination as she told about seeing the phantom, his kilt, the sword, and the blurred features of the face before it had all shattered. She had not been a willing witness.

"When he disappeared I heard you call out from the garden. You were crouched in the gravel and...." Her slender fingers wrapped round her throat. "I saw blood, but your skin wasn't broken, and your shoulder...." She glanced to the birthmark and he followed her eyes to examine the mark that had meant nothing to him. "Alex, you said you saw what he saw, felt what he felt, and I was so scared. This was the only safe place I could think of, so I brought you here and you were like ice." She pleaded with him to

remember. "I thought you were going to die."

Placing the cup on a box near the bed, he opened his arms so she could fall within. For a few seconds all he could think about or wanted to think about was her, and how good it felt to have her against his chest. "I shouldna have insisted we stay there, Ceitag. I'm sorry. I had no idea something like this would happen."

"You remember then?" her breath tickled the curled hair around his ear.

He tightened his hold. "No," he answered regretfully. "I dinna know how I got there, or here for that matter. I do know I woke in the night feeling verra cold, but...." He flinched. The cold and the sudden heat of another body pressing to his flesh, calling him to come back. From where? He had been standing at a door for the longest time, yet time didn't exist. Paneling. The door was made of wood and when he opened it, a blast of cold air swept, not through him, but into him and stayed there, gripping his lungs and his heart, causing both to stop functioning. And in the bitterness was a blackness no light could penetrate. There was something else in the inky depth. A voice. A woman's sobbing. She was lost and he had been overcome with immeasurable need to find her and release her from the torture of being alone and frightened and so cold.

She had touched him. She had stepped out from the darkness and wrapped her arms around his waist and he held her. They knelt, as though in prayer together, sinking beneath the earth, falling but still he held on, promising never to let go. She opened herself to him, the image of beauty and need. And as he fell, spiraling further downward, he had groped her body beneath the white gown, delicate and tender, and bore into her as though the act itself would release them both from this pit. She clung to him and sighed, legs wrapped around his torso and he had been washed away with hunger, feeding on her desperation to be rescued, to find love in a place where love was despised and forbidden. She had thrust to him with such violence that he could not contain himself. The passion overwhelming, the need frantic but when he cried out, terror filled his soul, burning flesh, torn throat, pain, and separation of death.

"Alex? What is it?" Kate was shaking his shoulders, pulling him from the memory of an empty black room and into the soft light of the stable.

The hammer behind his forehead thumped, mercilessly pinning his lids closed. "Ceitag," he moaned, pinning the reality of her body closer to his chest. "I'm going mad."

"No, Alex. No. We're stronger than all of this and we'll fight together."

That was all he needed to know. "I love you, Ceitag. So much."

Wide hazel eyes smiled up to him. "And that's why all this has gotten so intense. What you said yesterday, about them sensing what we have and what they lost. I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but we're going to have to do something, and soon, or else they'll keep haunting us. Then we'll both go mad."

"Do you love me?" He peered past her words and behind her shining eyes.

"Even though ye know so little about me or the life I've led. But right now, right this very moment, knowing what ye know now, do ye love me?"

"Yes."

The confirmation bathed his heart with luxury. He may have been standing on the threshold on madness, but as long as he could cling to her sensibility, Alex knew his feet were grounded. "Then I have the strength to go on."

"What do we do next?"



"We go back to the house." Alex sat up with a heave of flexing muscle taking her with him. He felt her shudder beneath her clothes. "Just to look around again. We'll spend our nights here, okay? That way ye will no need your rolling pin." Fighting a short spasm of dizziness, he searched the room for his clothes.

"Okay," she agreed. "Tell me first, though, what you're looking for this time."

"To begin with, my clothes. What did ye do with them?"

"Alex, you were naked when I found you in the garden. I have no idea where they are."

He shrugged, dismissing the incident, pulling open drawers to find others. "Ye could bring yer things out here if ye like. My room is no as nice as the house though." He pulled on jeans, hopping on one foot at a time, nearly losing balance. "But I think maybe ye'd be more comfortable here. We both will." His head disappeared beneath the material of a knitted white sweater. Even in the momentary blindness he sensed her watching him and smiled inwardly. A thought of their lovemaking flashed through his mind and when he tugged the sweater around his waist he found her grinning up at him. Her cheeks were flushed as she dropped her gaze.

Alex knelt in front of her beside the bed, shuffling between her knees and pressing his forehead to hers. A wonderful scent of perfume drifted through her hair and he breathed it in while clasping her cheeks in his palms. Her rosebud lips parted, but before she spoke he leaned forward to taste them, the familiarity of her graceful reception dismissing all else except her and the way she had lifted the burden within his heart, a heart that was beginning to pump blood with renewed excitement.

His fingers followed a curve, from behind her ear, down the silk of her neck to collarbone. Pressing his lips to that spot he felt her swallow against his cheek and make that funny little squeaking noise that he had come to enjoy hearing so much. And there was shyness still in her touch. He smiled as she reached up his back and dug her nails under his hair. Did she know how much her touch made his body ache for her?

A voice within told him to beware: continue filling your senses with only her and you might never leave this room again.

Alex pulled back slightly. She was watching him again, understanding everything he thought, believed, and carried deep inside. Two, yet one and he could no more let her be away from him any more than he could rip out a vital organ.

The curve of her breast was in his hand; his thumb stroked the blouse that protected an intact shyness. Yet, if he wanted, she would let him close, because she was indeed his own.

The button slipped, revealing an edge of white lace. Alex permitted the pad of his finger to stroke the material. All things wonderfully feminine, above and below. He could not help pressing his cheek into the warmth. She cradled him there, and he felt like a frightened child being soothed, the only place in the world where he could be protected and beyond harm's reach. His Madonna. And he knelt before her, a servant and a disciple, to do for her whatever she asked.

"Alex?" she asked above him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, his lips brushing her breast. "As long as I know ye are with me."

"I am," she whispered into the top of his head. "Know that I am."

And with a tight squeeze and reassuring hug, they were up and facing what the

future had to give, together.

\* \* \* \*

Except for the back door being slightly ajar, there were no telltale signs of the panic Kate had experienced the previous night. The vision of Dougal standing sentinel in the window drifted through her mind's eye, but she concentrated following Alex as he maneuvered the empty rooms, stepping carefully as though some small piece of evidence might crack beneath his feet. But there was nothing. Even the bedroom was quiet and at peace. Kate took a few minutes to pull up the covers on the bed as an act of respect, although she wasn't sure why. One last quick glance at the window and she was out. With any luck she would never have to return.

She found Alex, arms crossed meditatively, in the foyer studying the wooden paneling beneath the steps. Each section of dark wood portrayed a small bunch of grapes. Meticulously carved, Kate respected the creative hands that had accomplished such a delicate uniform effect. She suspected, however, that this was not what Alex was pondering.

"What is it?" she asked, slipping beside him.

"Um, oh." He startled at her question. "I was just thinking about her scream."

"Thanks for reminding me," Kate scolded. It was, among other things, what she wanted to forget. "But why are you...?"

Alex darted away, leaving her to search for the mystery. What was he thinking? It was just another wall, slanting because of the angle of the stairway. He returned, a look of urgent expectancy on his face, a crowbar clutched in one hand, a flashlight in the other. Before she had the opportunity to ask what he was doing, Alex had broken a section of the paneling open, squatting to get a better look inside.

Something urged him on. Another section was being torn away and then another, until a gaping, distorted hole yawned up in front of them. A fine white dust puffed up and sparkled in the dull streaks of sunlight. Then the narrow yellow light stabbed through the murky darkness. Alex leaned in, fingers gripping the oak steps above his head.

"What do you see?" Kate asked. She squinted through but saw nothing other than the shadows framed by the bulk of his white sweater.

He muttered something in Gaelic. His voice was muffled as though the place he found behind the paneling was larger than it appeared from the outside. She tapped his shoulder. "What?"

He pulled his head out, turning owl-wide eyes at her question. "There's another stairway. Ye know what this means?"

Kate shook her head. "No." She had little doubt he would explain.

"It means there's a cellar." He had already swung his feet into the black hole and was slowly sliding down out of sight.

Stunned into speechlessness Kate was mortified he was disappearing below. There was a clatter and a thump and a voice that called up from nothingness, "Are ye coming?"

Kate leaned into the space to see the light scanning the stone walls that circled the steps. She was intrigued, but the thoughts of creeping insects made her skin itch. As though reading her mind he said, "No spiders," while inching down farther.

"Wait," Kate called. She could stand this no longer and swung her feet into the

very spot Alex had.

“Watch those first steps,” he called. “They’re narrow.”

The air was stagnant and musty. She sneezed several times before bending to follow the light Alex shone on the step for her to follow. Her palm guiding her descent, she felt the velvety strands of undisturbed cobwebs and her neck crawled with nonexistent intrusions. Then the earth, damp and cold, was beneath her feet. The sound of water trickled from somewhere within the walls, gurgling quietly in an attempt to seep towards freedom. Only water could find freedom here between the cracks of soil, rock and darkness.

Her eyes were slowly adjusting. Not that there was a great deal to adjust to--forbidding stone scattered with cracks and mold which seemed to close in around her, prompting a severe claustrophobic sensation. She took several deep breaths and tried to subdue the feeling of having her life squeezed from her breast.

Alex reached over and took her hand. “There’s a tunnel,” he said, the pinpoint of light streaming out in front. She stumbled along blindly as he followed the glow. Something squished beneath her footing.

Still he led her on.

The tunnel opened into what looked like a small oval room made of arched stone which had started to crumble away with the erosion of time and elements. Alex stopped and she pushed against the warmth of his back, straining to peer into the limited light. A trickle of water sounded louder, but she could not see the source.

She followed the ray of light as Alex swung, focusing into the darkness. All around them were alcoves embedded in the walls like long beds. Each was empty. Between two at the other end was another tunnel, which led into more black emptiness and Kate prayed that Alex wanted to go no farther. Her curiosity sated, all she wanted to do now was turn to leave. There was a sorrow here. She felt it creep into her bones, more penetrating than the dampness.

“This is a crypt,” he muttered. “I had no idea it was here.”

“Let’s go,” Kate whispered back, as though the very sound of her voice would wake what was not there.

She felt him shudder through his clothing well before he drew breath to speak. His elbow moved back and forth. It was the first time she had seen him make the sign of a cross. “Oh, my God,” he said softly. Every muscle tightened, while the arm froze as he held the light steady.

Peeking around his shoulder she saw what had paralyzed him. There, on one of the catacombs, were human remains. All flesh had melted away, the bones stark and crumbled. All that held the bone together was what was left of fragments of clothing, a dress, long and white. The skull turned to one side, a perfect set of teeth grinning back at them as though pleased at last this place had been finally discovered.

And neatly folded within the bony fingers crossed on the material of the dress were Alex’s missing clothes--a pair of jeans and a denim shirt.

\* \* \* \*

The full implication of what she had seen didn’t register with Kate until they were out of the tunnel, out of the house and halfway across the courtyard. Finding underground passages within medieval homes was certainly not unusual, seeing the political and religious history of some areas. A wrong word or rumor meant many

innocent people died horrific deaths, and measures were taken for the pursuit of life and freedom. But a woman had been buried there--a fairly young woman from the healthy state of the teeth grinning from the clay bed. Was this Katrina? And if so, how did she end up there? Had history misrepresented her fate? And had she been there, unbeknownst to every proprietor of the house, since her death in 1616?

The most troubling fact, and it seemed the only clear-cut evidence they had that the unreal was becoming real, was the clothing within her bony grip.

Alex had left the scene untouched. He said nothing as he directed Kate around and away and as soon as they got back to the stables he disappeared behind a door in the corner. Within seconds she heard the splatter of water. 'I'm next,' she thought, as an imaginary cobweb reminded her of the damp habitat of unseen creatures.

And whatever else was doomed to that murky pit.

When Alex reemerged, his solemn mood had not been washed away with the shower. His eyes were distant, almost glazed with the images that must have still played within his mind and his face was drawn and pale. "Will ye be okay for a while?" he asked, hastily dressing and rubbing a towel into his thick mane. "I'll go over and get yer suitcase and whatever else ye need. Then I'll go to the shop and get us fish and chips. Ye must be hungry?"

No mention of crypts, bones, apparitions or lost clothing. Unnerved as Kate was, she followed his lead that deemed the subject closed for now. "Yes, that would be great. I'll get a shower, too."

He nodded a vague approval and was out the door.

As hot water darted into Kate's face and she washed off the belief her body was alive with insects, she thought of the upcoming morning. Not only a new day, but also a new perspective: an educated, detached, logical perspective. One that would renew their dying hopes.

## Chapter Fourteen

Alex barely slept. When he wasn't tossing and turning beneath one sheet, he was up and rattling about on the other side of the building. Finally an early morning quiet settled throughout the stables, and Kate, lulled by the solitude, relaxed enough to sleep a few hours. Not until she woke did she realize why: Alex was gone.

He was more plagued by the events of the previous day than she had suspected.

All evening they sat together on his bed and talked, not about the house or its mysterious occupants, but about the weather and decorating and favorite films and books. Kate did most of the talking and there were many times she stopped in mid-sentence while Alex drifted to that unknown place where only he could go. And before he shook himself back he would grip her hand harder or sigh or both. She felt his anxiety most when they gave in to the exhausting events of the day, crept beneath the covers, and he immediately pressed his cheek into her bosom, hugging her so that she would hold him in return. They had fallen asleep in each other's arms, but the torture within his mind jolted his body to consciousness, and his suffering refused him permission to rest.

And then, sometime while she slept, he had crept out to find what solitude the new day could offer.

When Mally's car rolled up the drive, Kate felt a churning wave of relief flood her whole insides. So much to tell, where could she possibly begin?

Mally hopped out first before the car even came to a complete stop, her huge mischievous grin innocent of the turmoil which threatened to tear Kate apart. Throwing her arms around her sister with uncharacteristic affection, Kate said, "Thank God you're back."

Mally's bright face clouded with concern. "What's going on?"

The sound of the car door slamming distracted Kate's explanation. She saw for the first time what a doctor of parapsychology looked like. And the only word she could think to wrap him neatly into one package was *old*.

He was tall and slim, and there was certainly a hint of ruggedness beneath the jacket that stretched across broad shoulders with the hoisting of cases from the back seat. Yet his casual dress didn't mask the years etched by deep lines down each cheek. A high forehead overemphasized dark pinpoint eyes, sunk beneath heavy brows and long lashes. His jaw was set squarely with considerable seriousness, typical of any stern professor, she mused, and his brown hair, heavy and straight, was slightly gray around the temples.

"Mally," she whispered, leaning politely. "Just how old is this guy? I know doctorates take awhile, but I honestly didn't expect him to be...."

"Don't let appearances fool you," she whispered in return. "Tim," she called, her shrill voice bouncing from every inanimate object within a hundred yards. "Come meet my one and only sister."

His eyes rolled cautiously towards them as though he was analyzing every small detail of the scene around him. And when he smiled it was brief, strained, and impersonal. "Pleasure, Kate," he mumbled quietly. "I've heard a lot about you."

“Um,” Kate answered. “Likewise.”

And as they shook hands, Kate sensed a quiet understanding. He told her with a firm grip that he could help, and she was instantly pleased with the man’s quiet assurances. In fact, she discovered it difficult to wrench her eyes from his stature.

Mally slid her arm under Kate’s as they strolled towards the house. “Where’s the Highlander?” she teased, her brows lifted as though she were about to hear some great mystery.

“Which one?” Kate returned sardonically.

“Oh-oh. Has there been trouble?”

“You have no idea.”

Tim placed two cases on the front steps and left them to examine the house’s exterior. He disappeared around the corner, oblivious to all else except the building and the silent messages it may have been trying to convey to his piercing examination.

Mally heaved a contented sigh. “He’s getting a feel for the place. I haven’t told him much. He wanted it that way so that he could come to a few conclusions himself without being prejudiced by my interpretations.”

“You sound like a psychic,” Kate laughed. “Too much time with the academia.”

“I love it,” she confirmed. “He’ll have a thousand questions for both of you. In the meantime, what do you think of him?”

“I don’t know yet. More importantly, what do you think of him?” Kate was still having some difficulty coping with their age differences. She hoped her little sister was erring on the side of caution.

Mally stopped suddenly and her expression melted into one of intimacy. “Tim is so serious and professional and underneath all that he’s loving and gentle and....” She focused on Kate’s continuing stare. “And mature. Okay, I admit it. He’s been around the block a few more times than I have, but I find that very attractive. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“And?”

Mally squeezed Kate’s arm so hard she thought the blood would be cut off. “He wants me to stay. Apply for a position being offered at the university. He says I have as much chance of getting accepted as anyone.” Her whole face beamed at the prospect.

Kate’s suspicion heightened. “Are you sure he’s not just saying that because...”

Mally squinted disapproval at the very suggestion. “Because we’re a couple? No. I do have qualifications, you know.”

“I know.” She felt regret for sounding so critical. “What are you going to do?”

Mally shook her head. “Don’t know yet. Wait and see. A lot to consider. But we’ll talk about that later. Tell me now about you and Mr. MacTavish.”

Tim had soundlessly reappeared around the other side of the house, nodding approval as he approached. “The two wings are obviously recent,” he said, his accent clipped. He was looking at the main doors. “Interesting the only way in is through the oldest part.” He smiled warmly, lines on his cheeks folding neatly into each other. “May I have a snoop inside?”

“Please,” Kate concurred. “Be my guest.”

He nodded thanks, once, and led the way, his head swiveling from side to side as he entered the foyer. His eyes dropped immediately to the torn paneling scattered about on the floor and then to the hole, still untouched from the previous day. Without question

he took several long strides, as graceful as any ballet dancer, and crouched before the hole, caressing the jagged edges as though coaxing it to speak.

"Been doing some redecorating?" Mally asked, but her voice, like the nervous joke, was empty.

Tim's bullet eyes turned to Kate. Enthusiasm shimmered behind each. "A priest hole," he said gently. "Kate, any idea on how old this building is?"

"Early sixteenth century as far as we can figure." Kate stared at the shadowy entrance. The steps, the tunnel, the crypt. Worst of all, the clothing folded in a corpse's fingers. She bit her bottom lip to keep it from quivering, waiting, watching not only for a ghostly appearance, but the doctor's reaction.

"What's a priest hole?" Mally interjected, coming closer for a better look.

"Some medieval homes had one specially built as an escape route or hidden room for a Catholic priest to hide if need be. There were times it was considered high treason to follow the faith." Tim turned to Kate. "Have you gone down?" He was watching her just as closely.

She pressed her lips together, keeping a gush of insanity from streaming out, and nodded. How graphic did he want her to be? "Alex found it yesterday." Her mind racing, she felt slightly detached and lightheaded. The sorrow seemed to bubble out from the hole but refused the chance to escape, crawling into the darkness again to wait, and watch.

Tim pushed his palm against the stale air from the broken paneling, as though he sensed the movement as well, feeling the cold like a weary traveler feels the heat from a fire. "What frightened you yesterday, Kate? Do you believe it's still there?"

Mally's face had twisted slightly in confusion. The question was rather vague, but Kate intuitively knew exactly what he meant. All events were dreamlike, shimmering images, whispering voices, but down there, between the damp stones and the tricking water, was something real, tactile, and visual. It wouldn't float away to cause more questions later. No. The bones would still be there, as they had been there, for hundreds of years, waiting.

Would the clothes be there as well, twisted within her chalk white fingers?

"Yes," Kate finally answered. "I believe it's still there."

Mally was glancing between Tim and Kate, not comprehending the silent conversation between the two. But she instinctively knew better than to interrupt. She kept her curiosity contained, for the time being.

Tim rose, with a grace of a dancer rising from the stage to bow at the end of a performance, slowly, without taking his eyes from Kate. And when he moved towards her she wanted to step away, partly from embarrassment that he studied her so intently, partly because he was so close that she could smell the remnants of fading cologne on his clothes. But her feet were firmly planted on the stone floor, and she swayed with a delicious sensation that he would touch her and the sensation would be nothing less than exhilarating.

He tipped his chin to one side. Close enough now that she clearly saw a muscle beneath one black eye shiver. Knife-thin lips were sealed, the lines of his face and neck more severe, but she was not alarmed. There was a mystical aura to him, as comforting and appealing as the other feelings within the house had been alarming. Anxiety drained from her body the closer he got. The release was almost sexual.

If Tim Younger had been a cult leader, Kate would by now have been a dutiful disciple, wrapped within his words and presence, hoping she would be his object of total attention.

“Do you believe that you are in danger?” he whispered. His gaze was so severe that she believed answering with mere words was the least of his expectations.

“No. I mean, maybe. After yesterday, yes.” She was beginning to tremble. Her knees were weak. Not that it mattered. He was close enough to catch her fall. She wanted to fall, feel his reassurance, and know that the hurt within her heart and that within Alex, would all go away. She believed that he could do this for them.

Kate choked down a sorrow-drenched lump in her throat.

He blinked, knowingly. He would not ask her any more questions.

He would not have been able to even if he had wanted.

A strong infuriated Scottish accent ripped away the spell. “What do ye think ye’re doing?” he shouted through gritted teeth, the voice loud yet steady. Alex was puffed up with rage, nearly blocking the whole entrance to the foyer where Kate stood, with Tim so close and Mally near by. But it was Tim who Alex was focusing his annoyance upon.

Kate struggled with an odd sense of delight mingled with apprehension. She didn’t have to be a student of psychology to understand that Alex thought of her as his own. This was his home, his property, and his chosen mate. And this man was an intruder; one who was too close to her. She half expected to hear the hiss of a sword being drawn and the flash of white as a warning for the rival to back away or pay with his life. Alex had no sword, but his fists were curling and uncurling with methodical regularity.

“Alex,” Kate soothed, shaking herself awake. “This is Dr. Younger. He’s going to help us,” she added, hoping to calm the bulky frame that drew closer.

Tim automatically took a step back. From the expression on his face, he, too, considered the thought that Alex would strike out, and was not about to issue a challenge.

“Oh, aye.” Alex threw a suspicious glance over the doctor. Then they locked stares. “Is he?”

Tim managed a weak smile. “Mr. MacTavish, I am very interested in your home.”

Kate slipped her arm around Alex’s waist. The tension tightened under her palm. He was a coiled spring and Kate was anxious to defuse the misunderstanding. They had to work together.

“As long as that’s all yer interested in.” Alex relaxed slightly with the sweep of Kate’s hand across his back. His broad shoulders lowered, the fists unfurled.

“Right,” Mally chirped, the friendliness in her tone startling everyone. “Tim, help me bring in the rest of our things, and I’ll make us lunch.”

The doctor dropped his gaze to her and to confirm the affection of their relationship he eased a strand of blonde hair from her cheek, and nodded. “Certainly.” With one piercing glance at both Kate and Alex, he bowed his head and followed her out the door.

“Alex?” Kate tugged his elbow. “What’s wrong?”

This was the man she had first witnessed on the edge of the garden through the fog as he had sat on horseback glaring at her: the same mistrust, the same suspicion



etched across his dark face. The same insinuation of unspoken words, that strangers were not welcomed, regardless of intension. It wasn't just the doctor who had entered their lives to share hope. It had been her, too, until they managed to get through the growing pains of acquaintance. Alex was deeply suspicious of everyone and she now realized that his conjecture was born deeply from the past he hadn't shared.

"Alex?" she insisted. "Please, we need his help. Now more than ever."

"I dinna need his help. I no like the looks of 'em." The accent was heavier. The troubled man within was surfacing; the fists doubled again. "And ye had the nerve to say I was a cradle robber," he mumbled snidely.

"Just a few days, Alex. It won't hurt to find out what he has to say." She spoke softly, assuredly, watching his face for confirmation he at least trusted her judgment. "For me?"

Alex glanced from the torn paneling to Kate, wariness slowly fading into reluctant acceptance. "I shall listen to what he has to say, but that does no mean I have to like him."

"I know, Alex," Kate smiled, admiring his fortitude. "I know."

Mally enjoyed cooking. She enjoyed it even more when the appreciative recipient was male. And Kate found it amusing to watch Tim hover near the counter with her, passing a utensil, or getting something from the fridge that she requested. They chatted continually, she giggled often, and he would hardly allow her from his sight. There was a closeness between them, a bond. Two very different people, but that spiritual connection they recognized, pampered, and obviously held with mutual respect. He would often reach out to touch her hair, or her shoulder, or pat her gently on the backside. It was evident they were intimate, knowing and sharing each other's secrets. If Kate had had any misgivings about her sister's attraction before, she dispelled them now.

And Timothy Younger had a demeanor that fascinated Kate. He was a complex man, secure in a depth of experience and knowledge of the human psyche, yet simple in his reasoning, clear in conveying his own quiet logic, sympathy and empathy. She certainly admired him.

For all the same reasons Alex distrusted him.

But they had a problem to solve and whether Alex liked it or not, Dr. Younger was a pivotal link.

Mostly due to Mally's enthusiastic prodding throughout lunch, Kate retold the eerie occurrences: the dreams, the rider on the moors, the phantom smoke, the woman's scream, although they didn't explain what she and Alex had been doing at the time of the scream. Then, she placed her fork on the empty plate and leaned in her chair, to relate in detail the episode of waking to find Dougal standing in the window. She couldn't help but relive the whole evening as she spoke, catching her voice, hoping her trembling wasn't noticeable. She had wanted to sound brave, perhaps in an unconscious desire to impress Mally's friend, who offered no comment, or question through the whole meal. Mally, on the other hand, could easily have been a most successful talk show host. She bombarded her sister with a flurry of questions, insisting on detail, and in some instances asking her to repeat some sections.

"You actually saw him standing right there?" Mally sounded incredulous.

"I came very close to touching him. It was so real. He didn't move but I heard

the rustle of his kilt, and when I reached out," her finger stretched across the table in remembrance, "he swung around and I saw his face. Well, I saw where his face should have been. And maybe I fainted for a second because when I opened my eyes the figure was gone and Alex was...." She stopped and looked at Alex who by this time had retreated to the couch with a bottle of whiskey. He hadn't eaten much and had said nothing. "Well, Alex, perhaps you want to explain what...."

"Nay," he blurted. "Ye do a good job, Ceitag. Carry on."

Kate felt slightly hurt. She hadn't meant to intrude on what Alex might have considered personal and private between them. But they had to know. She went on, explaining what he had said, his confusion, and her horror at burning flesh and blood. She did not share the fact Alex forced himself on her, although the scene drifted through her mind. When she looked at Alex she considered that he was thinking of it, too.

Then there was a moment of silent contemplation, broken only by Mally's whistle. "Wow!" she explained. "This is so fascinating." She nudged her companion. "Tim, how can you explain this?"

He swelled slightly to an intake of breath and sighed, "Scientifically--not possible."

"Then why air ye here?" Alex asked, his voice wracked with contempt.

"To eliminate all environmental possibilities. Once those variables are successfully dispelled, then the research towards the paranormal takes on a more convincing conclusion."

Alex throat contracted with a guttural sound of disgust. "Where did ye get yer education, Dr. Younger?" he asked through locked jaw.

"Oxford," he answered matter-of-factly. "And please call me Tim."

"Och, Oxford, is it? Of course, would be." Alex leaned forward propping elbows on parted knees. "Weel, would ye mind, Doctor, not rubbing my nose in the fact and speak as though I were no one of yer posh students."

"I'm sorry. That wasn't my intention." Pushing his chair back, Tim leaned toward Mally, whispering in her ear. She darted off upstairs while Tim settled into the armchair directly across from Alex, and cleared a space on the table. Folding his hands on his lap, he met Alex's gaze. "Mr. MacTavish. I have not come here to ridicule you or any of the events within this house. I am honestly interested and it is my intent to understand and, to the best of my capability, explain what is going on. In order to do that I will need your co-operation. If it is your wish that I intrude no further, tell me now, and I shall drop the subject completely."

The corners of Alex's mouth shivered. He twisted the glass in his hand, rolling the proposal over in his mind. Blinking several times, he knocked back the drink and slumped into the sofa.

Mally returned with a briefcase, which she dutifully placed beside Tim's chair. He smiled his thanks at her and immediately returned his full attention to Alex. "Would it help if I told you a little about what I do?"

Kate crept to Alex's side, on the sofa, curled her legs beneath her and reached for his hand. Alex flexed his fingers in her hold. "Yes," she answered. "Have you seen this sort of thing before?"

"Kate, what I have seen mostly are circumstances which indeed have a logical explanation. When I visit a home and meet the occupants, I first need to eliminate every

plausible explanation first. Once this criteria has been satisfied, then and only then do I start asking questions regarding the implausible.”

Alex flinched; Kate felt the steel in his arm harden.

“Mr. MacTavish, have you ever seen a white raven?”

“Nay, I canna say that I have.”

“Nor I. But maybe I have been looking in all the wrong places.”

Mally came out from the kitchen grasping a bottle of wine. “Anyone care to join me?” she asked. “I have a feeling I’m going to need this.”

Alex rolled his dark eyes to Tim and said, “Ye can have a drink of whiskey, if ye prefer.”

Tim accepted with a noise of pleasant gratitude. Kate sighed. The tension crackled quietly.

“Psychology is the scientific study of the human mind. Many still consider this a contradiction because the mind with all its individual characteristics and elusiveness is almost impossible to study with clarity. The process of interacting neurons is indisputable. How the individual reacts to that process is unique. It is what creates the personality. When I started studying psychology, I was mostly interested in what happens to the mind when these reactions go wrong, creating abnormalities such as neurosis, or psychosis....”

Alex leaned forward again and while pouring another drink growled, “I hope for yer sake ye’re not insinuating I’m a nutter.”

Tim smiled. His tone softened. “No, far from it. But I have to rule out the possibility, especially if I am to present my theory as factual. For every expert conclusion I make, another expert will dispute my findings.”

Alex stabbed his finger impatiently in the air. “I dinna care about experts and their theories, Doctor. I for one dinna need proof as to what’s in this house. I know what’s here.”

“I understand that,” Tim continued. His cheeks flushed with the excitement of the growing interaction. “And I have no doubt what I have heard is true. But I have to start with a criticism, saying that I don’t buy your theory about former inhabitants, lost love, and the affect on you.”

An odd sound gurgled in Alex’s throat denoting exasperation.

Tim twisted his fingers in the air as he thought a moment. “Let me put it this way: as humans we instinctively need to feel there is more, that death is not the end. From my experience I have discovered that many people accept philosophy or religion or nothing, and it’s easy for them. Others are thinkers, creators, passionate about the world around them and what lies beyond. That’s not to say philosophers or holy men are not creative, they are, but many times the deep thinkers are more open to have things happen to them that defy explanation; they are more susceptible to the supernatural. Obviously, that has happened here. Both of you are intelligent, sensitive, and open, and both of you have been rattled by something. It is my job to make sure that that something is not,” he held up his long clever fingers and began counting on them, “imagination, and projection of consciousness, unresolved emotional problems, or simple creative genius.”

“So the bottom line is what?” Alex asked. Despite himself, he was growing more interested in the proceedings.

Tim snapped his briefcase open and pulled out a stack of papers. “The bottom

line is that you let me ask a few personal questions. I take that information into account with whatever data my technology picks up. I'll make a few conclusions, suggestions if you permit, and we go from there." He smiled, the corners of his lips turning down as he did so. "With your permission," he repeated. "Otherwise I'm fighting a losing battle and all our time is wasted." The pen between his fingers clicked in the belief the response would be positive.

The room became quiet. Kate could sense the struggle within Alex as he twisted and sighed heavily in consideration.

"How personal?" The apprehension returned. He squeezed Kate's hand; only she knew that he had.

"I won't lie, Mr. MacTavish. My questions may appear intrusive. But I hope you realize my goal for asking is professional."

"Alex," Kate whispered. "Would it help if I left you alone?"

"Nay," he startled, throwing frightened dark eyes to her. "Nay. I want ye with me, always. Remember, the gates of hell, Ceitag? I feel as though I'm looking at the gatekeeper's face right now." He managed a quick smirk. "But I canna promise to give away all my secrets."

The brown skin of his throat moved as he swallowed hard. "Aye," he said, shooting a warning glare at the doctor. "I'll answer yer questions. I am still no sure what good it will do, but," he held Kate's curled knuckles to his lips and kissed them. "For now I will play yer game."

"Fine," Tim said with satisfaction, flipping the first page. "Let's see if we can't find that white raven."

## Chapter Fifteen

The first series of questions were relatively harmless. Alex confirmed his childhood was trauma-free, his relationships well rounded, that when his mother died he went through the normal stages of grief expected for a fourteen year old. He admired his father and was not angry when the man remarried. And he had always gotten along well with his half brother, Doug. Nothing seemed out of place, or neurotic, Kate mused. She was no psychologist but it all sounded boringly normal.

Dr. Younger scribbled notes continually even when he asked questions. Alex had relaxed, even yawned once. A few drinks and little sleep were taking its toll.

“Are you creative? Do you paint, write, sculpt?”

Alex threw his head back into the couch and sniffed as he thought. “I wrote an essay in school about the process of making whiskey. Got an ‘A’.” His cheek shivered with the need to grin but he managed to subdue the urge.

Scratch, scratch went the pen. “Do you work with your hands?”

“Och, aye,” he nudged Kate. “I have a witness.” He winked at her.

The interviewer ignored the joke. “Any drug or alcohol related problems?”

He stiffened slightly in hesitation. Tim peered up at him from the paper. “A few years ago. Not now.”

The doctor continued to wait.

“I drank too much,” Alex confessed, tipping his glass in mocking salutation.

The pen carried on with its relentless notes. “Depression?”

“Suppose so.” Alex avoided Kate by taking a sudden interest in a loose thread on the pillow. “Ne’er thought it a problem, though.”

“Were you ever suicidal?”

“No.”

“Do you ever suffer sleep disorders?”

“I dinna sleep much. I ne’er considered it a disorder. Do ye?”

Tim shook his head as he continued writing. “Unlikely,” he mumbled. “But you have no recollection of being in the garden the other night, when Kate found you.”

Alex didn’t comment. He began running his fingers over the tip of his thumb.

“Any serious illnesses: high fever, epilepsy, blood pressure?”

“Nay.”

“Fights? Have you ever received a blow on your head?”

A sharp intake of air attracted everyone’s sudden attention. Alex was struggling to answer. “Yes,” he confessed quietly. “One night when I could no sleep I drank a gallon of ale and picked a fight.”

Tim put the paper on the table, crossed his legs and sighed. “I’m serious, Mr. MacTavish.”

“So am I, Dr. Younger.”

They locked eyes again. “Would you tell me why you instigated a fight?”

“He was English. I dinna like the English. Did no think I needed a better

reason.”

Tim picked up his glass and took a short sip. Shuffling the papers he placed them on his lap again, and said, “Have you experienced relationship problems?”

“With the English, aye.”

Tim chuckled. “Well, I have no doubt that goes without saying. But no, I meant something a little more intimate. Have you experienced sexual obsessions, doubts of your own abilities, inadequacies?”

The pulse in Alex’s neck quickened. “And what business is that to ye?”

“This is probably the most important question you could answer, Mr. MacTavish. Have you married, been romantically involved? Have you ever been in love?”

The nerve struck, raw and painful, Alex leapt to his feet. “I have every confidence in my ability,” he spit, a seething anger boiled below the surface of a flushed face. He glowered down at Tim with such contempt that for an instant Kate was certain he would strike out with his fists. Mally must have thought the same for she squeaked in a flash of fear. The good doctor would be no match if Alex truly wanted to illustrate how he liked to fight the English, gallon of ale in his belly or not.

Tim dropped his eyes from Alex’s glare. It was a signal of submission. He didn’t want to cause an altercation. “Your apparitions have not found their past love,” Tim said in a quiet soothing voice. “They could be a manifestation of your inability to do the same. If you are transferring your own self-doubts into a ghost story, then it becomes an excellent excuse. And if you can convince everyone else, then you convince yourself and are ultimately off the hook.” Now Tim stood, almost as tall, and in no small measure less of a threat. “If they are doomed you can say, ‘so am I’, and then you really don’t have to try any more. Have you tried to love and failed, Mr. MacTavish? Have you lost a woman you cared about to another man? Is that why you feel threatened?”

“Nay!” Alex shouted, taking a step closer, his right fist clenched and shaking. “She died at his hand and I had no control over it happening.”

A stunned silence rippled through the room.

Color seeped from Alex’s face. He whirled to Kate, suddenly realizing the implication of his confession. His guard had temporarily dropped in anger and now regret. He opened his mouth to speak to her. She saw her own confusion reflected in his eyes. He cowered and fled, and Kate watched him go, paralyzed in disbelief.

“Alex, wait!” she cried out, leaving the inhabitants of the room to their own conclusions. She didn’t care. All she wanted was to find Alex, to be with him, and offer comfort if he would indeed accept it.

And she found him, sitting on the floor of his room within the dull light of the stables, knees drawn up as a rest for his forehead, fingers interlocked around his ankles. Motionless, silent, wracked with the pain of a memory she knew nothing about. The air seemed saturated with his grief and she tiptoed quietly to sit on the floor in front of him. He didn’t acknowledge her presence. Bracing her shoulders against the edge of the bed, she drew her own knees up but stretched her legs so that her toes touched his, assurance she was still with him, no matter what.

*Do ye love me, Ceitag, knowing so little about me, or the life I’ve lead?*

Kate was prepared to wait for as long as he wanted to take.

After what seemed hours his fingers flexed and he lifted his face from the denim cradle. “Forgive me,” he croaked, wiping away what she suspected to be a tear. “I dinna

lie to ye. I....” The heels of his hand dug into his forehead as though easing a great ache. “I’m a coward,” he muttered. “Ye deserve better.”

Breath puffed abruptly from between her lips. “Better? A high school sweetheart who ran off with a bimbo to find himself, or a doctor who couldn’t untie the umbilical cord from mama? I think I’m the judge of ‘better’.”

“Guess maybe I owe ye an explanation.”

“Only if you want to talk about whatever’s troubling you.”

“I meant it when I said I loved ye,” he pleaded. “Ye do believe me, don’t ye?”

“Yes, of course I do. To have loved in the past is no crime.”

“Love was not the crime I committed.” His lids lowered, shielding self-condemnation behind. “Then again, maybe if I had loved her....”

“You don’t have to tell me, Alex, if you don’t want to.”

“Ceitag, I have carried this burden a long time, shared with no one. If ye love me like ye say, maybe now I can share without worrying ... without worrying ye’ll hate me as much as I hate myself.”

Fear of the unknown was usually worse than the unknown itself, or so Kate had come to believe. She had one of those faces that strangers seemed to instantly warm to. They would catch that spark of sympathy and tell her things that strangers shouldn’t be telling. And then once the problem was out in the open, it wasn’t an ‘unknown’ any more. Perspectives sometimes changed with confessions and with it the fear was vanquished. Maybe this philosophy could help Alex now.

Then she wondered just how much of what Tim said could be true.

Alex flattened his legs on the floor, reached over and squeezed her ankle, but then withdrew. Kate stationed herself where she was. He had silently requested she do so.

“Her name was Victoria Campbell.” Alex drifted a moment in reverie at sounding her name. He kept his gaze fixed on his fingers, furred into his lap. “She was Jimmy’s niece, and she lived here with him for awhile. I had known her all my life. This is a small place, is it no?” he smiled. “We all knew the other’s business. But Vicki was bigger than this place. She wanted more than to just peek over the fence and wonder what was there, and I admired her sense of adventure. Jimmy was no pleased when she went off to Glasgow, but stubborn lass that she was she left us all. I missed her as any man would miss a dear friend. And then Jimmy called me and said she was having trouble. Met up with a man she should no have met up with, married something he was not, and....” Alex stopped and smoothed back his hair with trembling fingers. “Owen Lewis MacGregor.”

Kate didn’t need to hear a description to visualize the monster behind the name; she heard the contempt in Alex’s tone and pictured all she needed to see.

“She dinna come right out and tell Jimmy, but he knew she was being abused. He asked me to go to Glasgow, find out what was going on, bring her back if I could, and I said I would do what I could. She was all the old man had in the world. He loved her, as everyone did. She was a lovely lass but when I found her....” Alex’s shoulders shifted beneath the shirt. “The light was gone from her eyes. Replaced with fear, like a dog that’s been beaten o’er and o’er no matter what it does. I was sick to see her like that. So I stayed. I got a job in a pub, worked there as a lackey doing odd jobs and rolling barrels of ale about. Did no pay much but that did no matter. Landlady let me have a wee room free of rent. And I thought maybe if I was there then Vicki would come to me if she

could no stand him any longer.”

Alex sighed. “She was a stubborn wee thing. Or he had some sort of hold on her, I dinna know which. But she stayed with him. Then one afternoon she came in and her face....” He shuddered at the memory and glanced to one side, eyes clouded with sorrow. “I took her up to my room so I could talk to her, try to convince her once and for all to come back with me. All she wanted was for me to hold her. I did, Ceitag. I held her, and then I kissed her. It was ne’er my intention to take her to my bed, but I did. More than once. She’d come round to the pub at least twice or three times a week, and still I tried to convince her to leave.”

“Then for awhile she did no come to the pub. He did, though. I saw him many nights, drinking himself into a stupor with whores on his arm. It was all I could do to keep from....” Alex’s fists doubled and his jaw thickened. “But she made me promise. One night at closing she came through the doors looking so scared I knew then that she had enough. She was limping and her eyes were swollen from tears, so I took her upstairs and when she settled she told me.” Alex pulled his knees up and sank his face between them.

Kate’s impulse was to reach out and stroke his hair but a slight shiver in his neck warned her to just listen. When he lifted his face again his dark eyes were distant and a tear hung on one lash.

“She said the bairn was mine because he had spent all his time with his whores and she had been grateful he had.” The tear popped free and trickled down the side of his nose. “I thought my heart would break, Ceitag. Maybe it did, I dinna know. But that was it. I was no about to leave her again. I told her to stay with me and in the morning we would go back to Gillewne and I’d take care of her and the bairn. And finally she agreed. The light was back. But she wanted to get a few of her things first, a ring that had belonged to her mother and some clothes. I tried to convince her it was too dangerous, or that I’d go with her but she insisted on going alone, and, dear God, Ceitag, I let her go.”

With a sudden violent crack he threw his head back into the wall, penance for a sin he could never forgive himself for.

“I dinna know what she had said to him that night or exactly what happened but I could put the pieces together. Found out later the police said it was an accident.” Alex closed heavy lids as though in prayer. “She fell down the stairs and cracked her skull, they said. It was an accident. They let him go. They let the bastard go.” His voice was barely a whisper.

When Alex opened his eyes again Kate saw the tormented demon within peek out at her. Snarling lips contorted as the memory continued. “But I dinna let him go. I found him and I made him suffer. He could no fight me. He was used to pounding his fists into those who could no fight back. God forgive me, but I meant to kill him. I left him for dead.”

“I could no return here and tell Jimmy I had let his niece die. I might as well have been the one to crack her skull. So I ran. Like the coward I was, I ran. Lived on the streets, begged and stole for the money to buy drink. Ended up in London. I canna remember how long I was there. I was drunk most of the time. At least with the whiskey I dinna hurt, and sometimes I could even forget.” His nostrils flared in disgust. “Maybe I was wrong when I told your doctor friend that I ne’er tried to commit suicide. Maybe I



was trying. But I had to suffer first, pay for what I had done. Or dinna do.”

A pause lingered before he took enough courage to continue. “Met up with another derelict and between the two of us we managed to get to France with the intention of maybe working for our whiskey, picking grapes or something foolish like that. He did but I found myself in Paris, doing the same thing I had done before, drinking, living rough, fighting. I think that by then I might have died, except one night I was picked up out of an alley. When I came to I was in a wee room all decorated in pink. My first thought was that I had died and this was heaven.” He smiled, weakly, and glanced shyly to Kate before looking away again. “In a way it was. The bonniest face was over me, and she was washing the muck off my chest. I dinna understand a word she said but her voice was the sweetest thing I had heard in a long time. It felt good to be in a bed. And to eat. And sleep. But she would no let me drink and then the nightmares came. The room would fill with snakes and monsters and I screamed to be let out, but she kept me there, her and her friends. Finally it passed and when I had calmed down they would return and cared for me like the stray dog I was. I got stronger again and I canna tell ye how grateful I was.”

Alex bit his bottom lip although he was relaxing. The memories were taking a more pleasant turn and she smiled as he drew a heavy breath to continue.

“Took awhile before I was lucid enough to realize I was in a brothel. They found me half dead behind the building and took pity, I guess.”

“I don’t suppose your good looks had anything to do with it,” Kate laughed. It was a relief to find something to smile about.

“I wouldna know about that,” Alex continued. “I was surely indebted. The madam kept me on as extra help ... I mean, ye know, do things....”

“I know what you mean,” Kate said.

“Well, not to say I did no....” His voice trailed to a renewed memory. “That first time, since being with ... I had forgotten what it was like to be touched and held. God, it felt good.” Alex put his head back again but this time there was a soft expression sweeping over his face. “I knew then that I was going to live. I’d ne’er forgive or forget, but I could live. She taught me how to make love again.” He peered to Kate and the corners of his mouth curled to a sensual smile. “And ye, Ceitag, ye taught me how to be in love.”

Kate reached to him and Alex wrapped his long fingers around her hand, stroking her wrist with his thumb. “Maybe he is right. Maybe I’m the one that’s haunted. I just did no want to face up to the truth.”

“That might be part of it, Alex. But it doesn’t explain everything that’s happened.” She slid closer and welcomed his arm around her waist. “I’m no professional, but do you want to know what I think?”

His brow lifted.

“I think that you are as tortured as he is and he senses it. Perhaps Dougal has reached to you because you are the only one who can understand. Your pain, guilt, remorse, loss, is the same as his. Somehow, the both of you are in this together. Once you find absolution then he can rest as well.”

Alex sat quietly for a few moments. “Aye,” he whispered finally. “But how do I find absolution?”

“To start, in my arms.” Kate leaned to coax Alex’s advance. She didn’t have to

coax long. He fell to her, clinging with renewed want. His whole body trembled for her and she tried to sooth him by running her palms up and down his shoulders.

"Please," he sighed, breath tickling into her neck. "Please, Ceitag, hold me tight. Don't ever stop holding me."

His eyes closed he pressed his lips blindly into her throat and cheek, groping towards her mouth. Once found he kissed her with such conviction her shivering matched his. He pulled her so tightly into his chest that there was nothing beyond his strong arms. He had completely enveloped her and this was a magical place where only they could exist. And all she wanted or needed was what she had, right here, in her grasp.

When he pulled away from her embrace, she threw frightened eyes into his face. He peered back, eyes wide, lips parted, shoulders heaving with heavy breath. She didn't know how else to consummate her feelings, her love. Why did he look so hesitant? "Alex?" she whispered. "What's wrong?"

"I'm afraid, Ceitag. Afraid that I may hurt ye." His fingertips dug sharply into her back.

"I don't understand, Alex."

"I want ye so much that I dinna think I can control my strength. I'm afraid I might break ye in two." He looked to her yet beyond her, staring through a sexual haze. There was no doubt he was flushed with a raging passion, but she was certain she could receive all that he had to offer and then some.

"You won't hurt me," she whispered. "Unless you deny me."

"I could ne'er do that, Ceitag." And with that he crawled to his feet, lifting her to his bed. "I could deny you nothing."

Pushing her into the blanket, he braced each elbow at her sides and fluttered his tongue to her welcoming mouth. It was a reminder of the power he held, the ecstasy he was capable of inducing, searching every crevice. But she, too, had power and rewarded each kiss with a sigh of gratitude and longing. Her fingertips raced through his hair and down, tugging at the clothing that barred his chest, the sensual flesh that waited beneath. He lifted slightly and helped her to tug the shirt over his head. Flipping a black cascade from his cheeks he peered at her while he worked at the buttons of her blouse. It slipped from her shoulders and within seconds he was lowering to caress her breasts with his mouth, the heat from his lips burning wet pools into the soft curves of her bosom.

He paused long enough to gaze at what filled the palm of his hand, massaging the erect nipple only inches from his parted lips. "Ye are so beautiful," he sighed before taking it full into his mouth, gently swirling the nub on the edges of his tongue.

His hand worked the snaps of her jeans, tugging with expertise so that with a slight roll they were soon discarded. A finger dug under the white elastic while he lowered fluttering kisses to her stomach. Each fine hair stood like a thousand tiny soldiers preparing for battle.

All she could see was him. All she could feel was him. Bewitched, his spell of sensuality one that would take her far away and keep her there as long as his touch continued, as long as he was within her touch.

Beneath the dark skin his muscles worked with the motion of a jaw growing more forceful. With every breath he sighed her name, as though a chant, fulfillment of the vow, nearing absolution that had been so elusive.

He had wedged his shoulder between her knees, forcing them farther apart. Black hair glistened and tickled her thighs as hot breath ran over her flesh.

No secrets now, she thought, letting her head fall back into the pillow, and closing her eyes. He had shared with her a part of his tormented soul, and she had willingly listened, accepted, comforted, because that's what love was. His words, born of the heart, committed from the mouth, and now his passion, born from release, was committed from his lips. He had shared a secret and now he was caressing the most private gift she could offer.

And offer she did. Her back arched like a bow towards his mouth and as he pressed powerful kisses she clutched his hair, great silken strands of black hair, letting them slide through her fingertips as his head continued its relentless motion against her. No gentle signal encouraged more or less or distracted from the pleasure he, too, was deriving from this most intimate of acts.

And like the tip of her breast, he found the small hard nub with his tongue, and suckled, each luxurious wave penetrating raw nerves in a ceaseless race to ecstasy. Each hand cupped her buttocks, drawing her up and closer to greet him, and she clutched automatically for help as she fell violently into a cloud, taking her breath and consciousness, until she gasped a heavy moan to fill her dying lungs again.

Unconsciously, her thighs tightened against his temples and she held him quiet, for her body refused him permission to go on. Words were unnecessary. He pulled himself up and away, and while she struggled to focus on the room and her lover, he had watched her and taken off what clothing barred completeness of contact.

"Ceitag," he whispered, lowering his ruddy cheek to her bosom, rising and falling with quick bursts as her pulse tried to slow. Pushing his kiss to the inside curve of her breast, he sighed, "Your heart beats as though it wants out."

"It is out," she answered, watching his head on her breast, stroking the tendons pulsating in his neck. "You have it in the palm of your hand."

The arm draped across her stomach, tightened. "Then I shall keep it with care. I wouldna want another to try to take it from me." With a shiver the muscle loosened again.

Eyelashes flickered against her breast, pausing only when she dug her nails under the thick strands, massaging his scalp. Quiet, lost in thought, she expected him to again share his deepest desires. Yet he remained still, contemplative, almost sad.

"Ailigeán?" she said, hooking her hand under his armpit encouraging him to pull higher against her body. He did, nestling his chin against her throat, pressing the hard body he held in control to her side. Both her arms wrapped tightly around him, and she kissed his hair and breathed deeply of his scent. "Where are you?" she teased. "Are you in there hiding?"

She felt the curve of his smile on her skin. "I was thinking," he mumbled, the vibration of his husky voice in her own throat. "We have so much to learn about each other."

"Hm, suppose we do."

"Not just about our pasts, although that's important, but ..." He propped himself up on one elbow to look sternly into her face. "I want to know what pleases ye most. I want to hear that little noise ye make because when I do, I know I'm doing what ye want. But if I displease ye, ye must tell me." He followed the path of his fingers as they

stroked hair from her cheek. "I would ne'er want ye hurt. Ye are mine, Ceitag. I dinna care if that sounds chauvinistic, it's the way I feel, what I am. Ye are mine, and I mean to keep it that way." He pressed his lips so tightly together a fine white line appeared around his mouth. "I love ye," he whispered so softly she couldn't help but smile. He made it sound as though it were the first time he shared such a wondrous revelation. Maybe it many ways it was.

His long forefinger traced a path over her shoulder, up her throat, and against her bottom lip. "I want to ask ye, but I'm ... not sure that...." He swallowed with a growing nervousness.

"My darling," Kate coaxed, tipping her chin to greet his glance. "It would please me now if you'd stop yapping and make love to me."

His brow curled to surprise. Then he returned her smile. "Oh, aye. That I can do."

His whole body went to work. Every muscle turned to stone as he kneaded her flesh before hoisting his bulk full onto her. The hair on his thick thighs tickled the inside of her legs as he pulled her up to allow more space between them. His palms cupped her cheeks and he kept her face turned to him. But he did not lunge. He waited.

"Touch me, Ceitag. I want to feel yer hand around me." His voice was heavy with expectancy and when she flexed her shoulder to reach him, he moaned, the very thought inducing the steel beneath his skin to weaken.

His body was not a secret. Kate luxuriated in every hard curve, every patch of hair. She knew the brown mole near his navel, the purple birthmark on his shoulder; she tactilely recognized small bumps on his thighs, around his nipples and she knew his pleasure spots, behind his knees, under his armpits, his ears and voice box, and of course, his groin. She had charted this ocean well.

But the contents of his mind were hauntingly flexible. Just when she thought she had unlocked a secret and was secure in its depth, the tide changed, and she, drenched within his eroticism, would listen to the mysteries leak.

Wrapping his own fingers around hers he squeezed, encouraging her to do likewise. "Yer grip," he sighed. "It's the same as when I am inside yer body and I can feel ye tighten to me. Then I know ye love me, welcome me, and it excites me so much I can hardly control myself." His hand forced her grip to harden. Then slowly he released his hold and ran the pad of his forefinger to her flesh. "And when ye are so wet like this," the finger prodded a little deeper, "I know I excite ye and I feel as though my head will burst like a bubble."

"Dinna make me suffer longer," he sighed, eyes laden with thoughts of awaiting pleasure. "Guide me home."

The pulse within her hand stiffened as she eased him closer. His shoulders braced into position before his hips did, and he shifted his weight as she put her hand on his waist. He was close enough now to find his own way.

He made certain she saw his face, a deep flush intimating the pounding blood that coursed through his whole body. Thumbs caressed her temple and he paused, at the gates of her body, not hell. And the want was evident in the black pools beneath his lifted brow. "I know now," he whispered, shivering to contain his urge for just a few seconds longer. "That I have always loved ye, before I even knew ye existed."

She parted her lips to answer, tell him she understood what he meant, that she had

felt it too, and saw that their lives, all the heartache and pain and loss of their past, was meant to happen so that this very moment could exist. But her words were stopped short by a thrust into her body, drawing her breath sharply between her teeth and tipping her chin so it flinched into his throat, and all she could manage was to sigh delight as the waves of his lovemaking washed over her again and again.

He held her face so he could watch her expression. His moans heightened when her eyes widened, and they rocked together, her whole body gyrating to the methodical rhythm of his love. "Ceitag," his lips moved, but no sound uttered forth.

Kate drew her knees up against his sides, arching her hips towards his growing furor. Her claws slashed to the soft flesh of his buttocks demanding he lurch harder and faster and deeper.

"Ceitag."

He reared up, locking his elbows, thrusting only his hips, concentrating his full strength now to one section of his body, that one place from which energy manifested into power and power to the pursuit of bliss.

She saw the birth of his final cry begin between the mounds of muscle on his chest. It moved to his throat and his mouth opened to acknowledge the small burst still deep within but rising quickly. His jaw dropped as it lifted, vibrating the cords of his neck, straining through his voice box into a strangled release.

Hypnotized by the pleasure he found within her, she startled suddenly with her body's growing flutter and as the sensation rocked her she folded up into his chest, clutching his shoulders as if she could convey her own ecstasy into his by total bodily contact. Her jolt was the last passage he needed and with what sounded an agonizing cry for redemption he fell, throwing her back into the bed, legs wrapped around his hips, bouncing small circles to welcome and hold what his body pumped into hers.

His torso continued to struggle to calm, expanding and contracting as he gasped out one breathless word, "Ceitag."

A thin covering of sweat glistened on Alex's body, culminating in tiny drops on his forehead, a few of which sought paths over his brow or under his hairline. Kate kissed the saltiness and cradled his slowing pulsations, although neither made any move to unlock from the other.

"This keeps getting better and better," he smiled in satisfaction. Finding the strength to pull his chest from her flattened breasts, he again peered into her face, this time not with lust-laden eyes but with glimmering success. "Ye do that to me again, ye'll be a widow before I have the chance to wed ye."

Kate hadn't felt her face fall but Alex saw it happen. He pulled up, but not quickly enough. In a flash she had her elbow raised, a soft thud of bone into bone as it hit his jaw. There wasn't space for her arm to gather speed so the blow was far from hard. The effect of the act, however, was just as shocking.

"What did ye do that for?" Alex exclaimed, confusion in both his voice and expression. Rolling over on the bed he rubbed the slight discoloring of flesh.

Kate bolted upright. "Don't even joke about something like that!" she cried. "That's not the least bit funny."

"What? Getting married or being a widow?" He wasn't about to let her escape. Both hands were firmly holding her wrists as he crouched beside her.

"Either. Both. Nothing." Defeat edged perilously close to depression.

Consumed with Alex and his world of mystery, she had managed to forget about the pathetic occurrences that had recently plagued her personal life--especially her fiancé and the way he had ditched her after passionate commitments were exchanged. Even the hint of marriage caused those painful memories to surface, breaking out in a short fit of violence. Kate knew she hadn't hurt Alex with her striking out, nor did she want to, but that wasn't the point. She should never have taken her feelings of inadequacy out on the one man who was showing true affection. "I'm sorry," she sighed, running her fingertips over the stubble edge of his jaw. "I have a past, too. Maybe not quite as dramatic as yours, but I was hurt, and the very mention of..."

"Nay, Ceitag." He tipped her chin so she had to look him full in the face. "A lot has happened, has it no? And in such a short time. I shouldna told ye what I have been thinking quite like that." The warm palm caressed her neck and she fell slow motion into his chest, still hot and glistening from their lovemaking. "It's just when I hold ye and kiss ye, I canna bear the thought of ever letting ye slip away." His fingers tightened on her shoulders as though to confirm the strong hold he was searching for. "I canna be separated from ye, Ceitag, and I'm trying to think of some way to keep ye." She felt the neck against her hair contract with a swallow. "This is yer home, too, now more than ever. Ye leave and I'll be competing with ol' Dougal as to who haunts the place more."

Kate laughed. She had a vision of two ghosts, fist fighting each other in hope of male dominance in a mystical world where no soul is a winner through physical acts of aggression.

"Promise me two things," he said, lowering her back into the bed. "Promise to be honest and tell me exactly what ye're thinking." He kissed the end of her nose. "And, promise ye won't bash me about before ye say as much."

"I promise," Kate answered, and pulled him closer.

## Chapter Sixteen

It started with an impression that someone was in the room. Not only there but staring intently. When Alex flinched and cursed in Gaelic, Kate opened one eye to find Mally sitting on the edge of the bed, grinning from ear to ear and stuffing the last of a pasty into her mouth.

"Hi," she chirped, being careful to keep crumbs from falling into the blankets. "I have a favor to ask."

Alex rubbed his fingers through his tangled hair and groaned a mixture of disgust and disbelief. "How did ye get in here?"

A flash of blue blanket swept over Alex's bare torso as he propped himself against the pillow. "Well," she said, wrenching her eyes from the chest, "the door was unlocked. I figured you were up but," she flapped her palms in the air, "wrong again."

She didn't look awfully concerned about the mistake. In fact, Kate saw she was sneaking another long look at Alex's body.

"Mally," Kate scolded.

"Um. Oh. Right.... I wonder if it's a British thing to sleep in the nude because Tim...."

Alex made that Scottish sound in this throat. "Stop," he scowled. "A wrinkled old man is the last thing I want to visualize first thing in the morning." He pulled the covers over his head and sank from the conversation with a heavy sigh.

"He's not wrinkled," Mally protested. "Not when I get going on him, anyway." She smirked at her sister seeing that Alex had, upon hearing that comment, pulled the blanket over his head.

"I dinna want to know," came the muffled voice. "Go away."

"Least he's not grumpy. Anyway," she turned her attention to Kate who was throwing daggers with her glare. "We wanted to ask you and Mr. Congeniality here if it'd be okay to set up some equipment in the house. You know, cameras, recorders, stuff like that. Tim likes the hands-on approach to his work." Mally slapped the mound of blanket that concealed Alex's leg. "Sure you know what that's like, eh, lover boy?"

"Mally!" Kate hissed in disgust. "Behave."

Alex flipped down one edge of the blanket, enough to throw out his scowling but amused look. "I see who got all the Daniel's genes in your branch of the family." The blanket went up again.

"What's that mean?" Mally asked.

"Never mind," Kate said. "Just go and leave us in peace. Yes, you have permission to do whatever you want." She saw the covers beside her move with the silent laughter beneath.

Satisfied she had accomplished what she had come to do, Mally stood, brushing the odd crumb onto the mat beneath her feet. Her cheek shifted and with palms on her hips she continued. "Ah, I'm almost scared to ask, but Tim was wondering if he could look at the priest's hole."

The blanket shot down again and this time a wide grin bared white teeth. "I dinna think the priest would be too happy, but I would like to know the reaction."

Kate joined the fun. "Your doctor friend has turned out to be quite a little pervert after all, hasn't he?"

Alex turned a startled gaze at Kate and laughed even harder when he saw her straight face.

"Oh, very funny," Mally chided. "Guess I just worded that all wrong. At least I know you two have a sense of humor after all, even though it's at Tim's expense." She started for the door. "I shan't tell him what you said."

"Tell him he can do whate'er he wants, except," Alex's grin dropped at his serious intonation, "don't touch anything in the crypt. Not yet. Not until I go down again."

"Okay," Mally agreed cheerfully. "No problem. That part I think I can easily relate. You guys going to surface for lunch or has mating season in the Highlands only just begun?"

Kate picked up a book and threw it, missing Mally's head by a whisper. "Jealousy will get you nowhere," Kate yelled at her sister's sudden disappearance out the door.

A giggle was almost drowned by the crunching of stones as Mally made her way back to the house.

Alex cocked one brow at Kate and said with strained seriousness, "Ye really are a violent wee lass, aren't ye? I'd hate to see how ye treat someone ye dinna like."

"Let that be a reminder, then, to never get on my bad side."

\* \* \* \*

Kate stepped out of the small shower to a blast of cool air mixed with the odor of exhaust. The Morgan rumbled in the yard, fumes spitting past the open door of the stables and Alex had the hood folded, scanning the insides of his pride and joy. Kate dressed quickly and joined him in the yard.

"What's up?" she asked optimistically. She wasn't anxious for a rerun of yesterday's emotionalism and threw a hungry glance at the means of escape, two legs and four wheels worth.

Alex wiped an oil stain from his hand with an old yellow cloth and said, "Feel like getting out for the afternoon, my light? Let's go for a walk on the beach. Talk about the future." He smiled mischievously, a twinkle, small and true, buried beneath both black pupils.

"That sounds lovely. Yes, I'd like that."

"Good." He leaned into the car and shut off the ignition. "I'll get cleaned up and we'll be off." The scent of oil and fumes was more distinct when he brushed past her. He turned, walking backwards while watching her. "Don't go away."

Kate leaned against the car. Talk about the future. It seemed difficult to think of anything more than one day at a time, and now, 'the future' seemed to loom out as an endless expenditure. Whenever she thought of the future and sharing it with another, she had paid a price, usually with her heart. There had been friends, faces drifting through her memory, acquaintances mostly, and she had had dates and outings, but nothing serious. Sometimes she came out the worse for wear from careless spending but at least her pride was intact. Except for Tony. That sting was still sharp and she felt its edge



slice across her chest in remembrance.

But to dwell on that, here and now and with Alex, was nothing short of ludicrous. Still, the future. The concept was daunting. More daunting was how he wanted to direct the topic.

Kirkland Hall seemed to sparkle in the growing heat of the day. Reflections of sunlight danced on the windowpanes, shattered only by the tree branches that disrupted the glare. From the outside there was no hint of anguish within. A past, two people so in love, and all they ever wanted was to spend their short lives together, clinging to elusive happiness as though it were fine strings of light. A rainbow. There one moment and then vanished the next.

Found and then lost, tormenting their souls, because of a separation that should never have happened.

And now here she stood, trembling at the prospect her life was running a parallel line with the inhabitants from a long-gone era.

Alex re-emerged, stuffing his wallet into a back pocket and glancing at the sky. "It's going to rain later," he said.

Kate followed his gaze heavenward. The sky was an endless blue, the air calm and gentle in its warmth. "How can you tell?" she asked.

He opened the door for her. "I can smell it."

Alex turned the wheel to the right and the road took them past a few homes almost hidden by tall fences and hedges, until the country opened to fields that glistened in varying shades of green. Then, without notice, the fields melted away behind, and the stone fencing ended to reveal a glimpse of the sea.

He parked the car on a small mound off the road, disrupting a half a dozen sheep that startled at their discovery grazing the grass, which obstinately clung to the earth. They scampered off, to settle again, bleating their annoyance and then lowered their heads to resume their meal.

"There's a path right over there," Alex motioned with a flip of his hand. "It's the best one to take us to the shore."

Kate examined her footwear. The last thing she wanted was to slip or helplessly twist her ankle, becoming the weak female that is so often portrayed in the movies, forced to rely on the assistance of an all too masculine arm. Weak she was not and wanted to stay that way.

The path, however, was well trodden. Seeing it was the only accessible route in an otherwise steep terrain, there were definite steps gouged in the ground. Using the odd bush to hang onto in the more treacherous spots, she maneuvered quite well, with the minimum of assistance from her host--not necessary but appreciated just the same.

Beaches at home were placid creatures: soft sand, gentle surf, and sand bars that stretched endlessly into the curve of the tide. Here, however, she was immediately reminded she was not at home. A dark green swirl of hissing surf warned of the sudden deeps within a few steps of the rocky shoreline. The waves seemed angered their passage along the surface of the sea was to end and crashed with vocal vehemence, taking hostage smooth rocks that got in their way. The stones stuttered and complained, tumbling over each other, but helpless to the force that pulled them back out into the watery depths. The constant battle between rock and water was thunderous, and as Kate took footing on the rocky beach, she barely heard her own steps in the fray.

Alex slipped his arm around her shoulder, not in recognition of a silly feminine weakness to aid her passage, but simply to be close, feel her near, be at her side. It was one of the qualities she loved about him. When they first met he had peered down at her as though she should be subservient to his every wish; now she was his equal, an intricate part of his existence. His strength was hers and he equally drew from her stamina. Comrades. Soul mates. Lovers.

The vast power of the sea, the intimacy of their relationship. This was indeed a very magical place.

"I've come here for as long as I can remember," he said, leaning close to her ear so she could catch every word. "My father used to get quite annoyed, saying one wave would pull me out into the sea and I'd be lost forever. It was something I never considered happening and it certainly dinna stop me from coming. I could be alone, completely alone, and most of the time that's all I ever wanted."

Birds circled across the beach in front of them, diving and swirling and then disappearing into the small dark holes for nests in the chalk-white cliff that loomed up to one side. Sprigs of foliage gathered at the very top, peeking over, the only warning of the sheer drop within inches. Serene and majestic even in its foreboding danger.

They walked slowly on, each lost within their own thoughts, born from the continual motion around them. The ocean and the line of rocks that greeted its journey, having been here for countless centuries before them, would continue the relationship for countless centuries more. The fact two people were taking part in this small wrinkle of time was of no significance. Except for the recognition they gave each other, they were ignored, smaller parts of a far larger whole.

An eerie calm swept through Kate's soul. She, too, had often found refuge from troubling thoughts wandering the length of an isolated beach. But this was different. The man against her side was a part of her now, and the vastness of life didn't seem so daunting any longer.

Alex pointed to a fold in the cliff's side. "There's a cave," he yelled over a sudden crash of a wave. "That's where we're headed." He tugged her elbow, guiding her closer.

The entrance was low, curved and jagged. Kate had to bend to get inside, but once they scrambled over the flat wet stones, the rush of noise outside seemed to suddenly mute. Only resonating echoes penetrated this quiet place, and that was mostly from the distant trickle of water from somewhere deep within the darkness. She was relieved when he guided her to a large flat rock that looked like a prehistoric sofa. Cave exploration was not on her mind.

Kate felt as if she had entered a sacred place. Muffled sounds crept from unknown sources, dull and lifeless, mysteries not meant to be answered by the human mind. She had heard the same disjointed noises from church services in ancient cathedrals, like the voices of a thousand saints calling from the past with secrets to a greater understanding, yet their words unrecognizable. The air was still in silence until either a distant wave crashed from outside or some sightless creature slithered to a rock within the darkness. All of which was beyond her understanding. And it was meant to stay that way. She bowed her head in submission.

The gentle stroke of a finger wakened her from her wordless prayer. She looked up into the gentlest, most devoted eyes she ever had the pleasure to know. And she alone

was the object of that unfailing devotion.

His lips parted to speak and then closed again. Interlocking her fingers into his he sighed and tried again, this time without meeting her gaze. "This is more difficult than I thought," he said. The corner of his mouth squeezed tight as he rolled his lashes up, pleading with twisted brow that she remain patient. "I imagined something like this for a long time. That I'd meet someone special and love her more than life itself, and when the years ticked by and it ne'er happened ... well. I guess in many ways, Ceitag, I simply gave up. I adapted to the belief I would be alone, and that was okay. Worse things could happen." He drifted a moment, tightening his fingers around hers and then letting go again.

He smiled weakly. "My heart's racing. Ye make me nervous."

Kate pressed her palm to his chest. It was indeed hammering away and his shyness was making her smile because she understood he struggled for all the right words. There was much on his mind and she really didn't care how he said any of it, as long as he poured out the contents to her. "You're making yourself nervous," she said.

"Aye. I suppose that's true. It's just ye're that someone special, and now that ye've walked into my life I'm surely no about to watch ye walk out." His shoulders rose with a deep intake of air. "Ye're a part of me. When I go to sleep I want it to be to the sound of your breath against me. When I wake in the morning I have to know ye'll be there so I can know your first thoughts. These last few days ye've shown me what it's like to be truly in love and now I know I canna live without ye. Some say ignorance is bliss, but nay, I will argue that now. I have found my bliss and I pray ye have as well." His eyes brimmed with water behind, catching a light that sparkled through the opening of the cave from the sea outside. "Marry me, Ceitag. All that I have and all that I am, I promise is yours. Say yes; make me whole. I can only be complete with a full heart, and ye are the only one who can do that."

Alex lowered his eyes as though bracing for inevitable rejection.

"This is all very fast," she whispered, not really wanting to speak her thoughts, but speak she did.

"Aye, I know." His body flinched as though he expected her to say exactly that. "I thought the same thing, Ceitag, but, time is something we dinna have much of. I mean, I dinna know when ye were meant to leave, how long ye meant to stay here, so I said to myself that if I were to tell ye what I was thinking and feeling, then I should do it soon, and...."

Kate pressed her finger to his lips. "Stop," she commanded without force. "Listen to what I have to say now."

He obeyed, much like a child anxious to follow all the rules so that a certain gift would be the birthday reward. But this was no child. He was her beloved and would stay such if only she were to give permission.

"I love you very much, Alex."

His forehead crinkled as though hiding a stabbing pain. He turned slightly and mumbled into the heel of his hand, now firmly planted against his face. "Sounds like there's a 'but' following that."

Kate took a firm grip of his forearm, the muscle beneath hard as the rock they were sitting on. "You're not listening. Please, take a look at all this from my perspective for a minute. I come here on a short holiday, meet you, and fall in love. A relationship is

a big gamble at the best of times, but you're asking me to give up everything I left behind and take a chance living here with a man whom, technically speaking, I've only just met, love or not."

His body was tightening. She dropped her tone. "Alex, what if it doesn't work out? What if a couple of months down the road you find you don't really love me, or ... that I don't really love you?"

Defensive, angry eyes shot to her. "Ye said ye loved me. Were ye lying all along?"

"No. No, not at all. I'm just saying I'm frightened things will suddenly change and I'll be alone. It happened to me before, but at least then I could return to the home and the job I had established, nursing a broken heart. If I leave that behind and then..."

Her voice trailed. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Aye. Ye're saying you dinna believe me or yer own heart."

"That's not fair, Alex. I'm only trying to protect myself."

The silence lingered. Light within the cave seemed to fade, and above the pounding waves outside Kate was certain she heard the familiar rumble of thunder. The world outside was as unsettled as the one within her heart.

"So ye do plan to leave me after all?" Alex said finally. "And I will have no control in the matter." He turned his shoulder from her and dug his toe into the earth beside the rock. "Again," he added, quietly but with a snarl. "I guess history does repeat itself."

Kate was losing him. Losing him to the sour memories of the past, which were surfacing with renewed velocity. Losing contact because he inched his body away, perhaps subconsciously, but he, too, was protecting the exposed emotions of the heart. Losing what was on his mind for he had tightened his lips and kept every anguished thought from escaping.

This is not what she had intended. The hurt etched into his beautiful dark face was her fault, and she desperately searched for something to say that would help convey the contents of her own confused heart.

"When I was a little girl my mother used to read me these wonderful stories about love, and how if the lonely princess was patient long enough, her prince would rescue her and they would live happily ever after. Like all little girls I believed that would happen. It had to because that was the most important thing that could happen. Then I went to school and found out what a bunch of irresponsible, annoying creatures the opposite sex really was."

Alex's mouth curled to a wry smile. "That when yer violent nature surfaced, Ceitag?"

"Those stories should never be told to girls," she said, ignoring his reference to violence. "Because once we start to find out there's no truth to them, then we become cynical. And a cynic is someone who has lost faith."

"Aye, that I know."

"Alex," she pleaded. "Please be patient with me for a while. There is much bitterness in me still, and it's not your fault, it's just you happen to be in my firing line when I try to exorcise my problems. But you're also teaching me to let go again, and despite how safe you make me feel, that voice inside me is screaming that I am a fool to trust anyone. I can't help being haunted by that any more than you can help..."

Alex's expression was so stern she stopped suddenly and lowered her gaze to his hand, braced on the smooth rock between them. Stroking the line of knuckles, she sighed. "Seems we're all haunted, doesn't it? You and I, Dougal and Katrina."

"Some more than others," he muttered, not hiding the edge to his tone. He lowered his head and thought a few moments before speaking. "What do ye want me to do, Ceitag? Tell me, for I will do anything as long as in the end ye'll stay."

Thunder growled at the opening of the cave; huge drops of rain began to splatter the pebbles surrounding the entrance to the cave.

"But I'll tell ye this, Ceitag: I have pride as well. I will no keep begging. Ye know how I feel, how deeply I care. I wouldna asked ye to marry me otherwise. Ye must decide while ye're here, because if ye do leave, there's no turning back for either of us."

A tinge of annoyance fluttered through Kate's stomach. Ultimatums. Corners. Do or die. "Now or never," she said flatly.

"I dinna mean to sound harsh." He had turned to face her again, folding one leg on the stone. Taking her hand he kissed the palm, holding it near his mouth, eyes closed. "I love ye. I always have and I know I always will. But I need to protect myself, too. If ye leave, then ye leave forever. I canna die a lingering death. It must be quick."

A chill rippled down Kate's spine. She had never thought of herself as an executioner, nor did she want to start now. "Alex?"

The black eyes slowly opened. He looked at her but through a wall. The screen of protection had already gone up.

"Could we carry on, just the way we have been? I want to hear your voice," she touched his throat and then gently leaned to kiss his lips. "And I want to sleep with you, be near you all the time, listen to everything you want to tell me and..."

"And if I match up to yer expectations, ye'll stay." Bitterness oozed from every word.

"I dinna mean to sound harsh," she mimicked. "After all, you did ask. Now I'm saying. The bottom line is, no matter how fast or hard or far I've fallen for anyone ... do you hear me? Anyone. I am not going to leave my head stuck in some romantic cloud so that my whole vision of the future is shrouded in emotionalism. Yes, I love you very much, and yes, I know you love me and that's a wonderful foundation to work from, and work from it we shall."

Kate's backbone had straightened like a flagpole and despite their difference in height Alex was looking up at her. His bitterness was replaced now by cautious amusement. He shook his head while he grinned, a lock of dark hair curled into his forehead. "Aye, well. I suppose ye're right."

A warm pool from his open hand cupped her cheek and before he leaned to kiss her he sighed. "I guess, my wee princess, that I shall have to prove to ye that your prince is real."

## Chapter Seventeen

Several boxes littered the entrance to the hall. Kate scanned each as she tiptoed past. Most were opened displaying a variety of expensive looking equipment--video cameras, tape recorders--as well as simple unobtrusive instruments--thermometers, a Dictaphone, chalk. Kate stifled a smirk. The tools of a real life ghost buster. She was happy to be spending her time with Alex in the stables, not surrounded by this, which, despite everything she had seen, still bordered on the insane.

No noise indicated where her sister and Tim might be, although the car outside certainly was proof of their residency. Kate listened for footsteps on the second floor, or a murmur of voices, but all was still. She peeked through the half closed doors of the east wing and except for a bottle of wine and a few dirty glasses there was no hint of their presence. Continuing through the foyer she stepped out into the back garden, greeted by a flood of chattering birds rejoicing in the passing of a sudden summer rainstorm.

Sunlight danced over the puddles on the patio left by the storm and the smell of the damp earth wafted everywhere. Combined with a faint brush of heather in the breeze, Kate inhaled deeply, enjoying the peace the scene had to offer.

Then a slight movement near the bottom of the garden caught her attention. Before focusing she allowed the images of ghostly figures to dominate her imagination. But these were no ghosts; they were lovers, and certainly real.

Mally's pointed chin was tipped up, her blue eyes wide with adoration as she stood pressed against him. And Timothy, secure in his own devotion, was leaning to kiss her, his arms wrapped around her waist with intimacy. As they kissed, Kate watched, hoping not to be discovered, because witnessing this genuine act of affection meant more than a simple act of voyeurism. This scene was most satisfying for being unexpected. She suddenly felt that they were inadvertently mirroring what she now had with Alex.

On the outside, momentarily detached, she saw herself in Alex's arms, being offered a future of respect, commitment and adulation. And how had she rewarded his opened heart? With caution, denial and speculation.

Kate stepped silently back, the lovers in the garden disappearing from view. Clasp her chest to dull the ache, she found herself questioning her so-called wisdom. The conversation with Alex drifted through her mind. She had been so satisfied at the time with how cleverly she guarded her every word, and relieved that he seemed to accept what she said. But somehow she couldn't shake the feeling that a small bond between them didn't actually break but had frayed and loosened.

What was she doing? Why couldn't affairs of the heart be simply black and white without any varying shades between? Why couldn't she focus? Did she want him, or not?

"Oh, Alex," she whispered to a small white stone by her foot. Picking it up she let her thumb stroke the smooth rounded edges, and then folded her fingers, burying it in her palm. "I love you so much it hurts."

Then she slipped the stone into the soft folds of her pocket.

\* \* \* \*

"Katie," Mally squealed, coming through into the living room, Tim on her heels. "I'm glad you're here. You can help us get some of this equipment sorted out."

"It's all right, love," Tim said softly. His eyes were still clouded with the rapture of their kiss in the garden. "I'll get started and if I need some help I'll call." He smiled warmly at Kate and bowed slightly before going back into the shadows of the foyer. Within seconds they could hear the sounds of cardboard being ripped apart.

"You look worse than usual." Mally made her way to the kitchen. "Would you like some advice?" She pulled ham and cheese from the refrigerator. "Or would you just like a sandwich?"

"Mally. You and Tim...."

"Um. What about us? I'm not about to get a lecture on age gaps, am I? Because if I am," she waved the butter knife menacingly, "Save it. Eighteen years these days mean nothing."

Kate did the math. "I thought he was older than forty-six," she muttered, not really intending to be heard.

An exasperated sigh the response. "He is, in some ways, but not in most. Doesn't matter to me, though, one way or the other."

Kate stared at her sister. It was true. She could see honest sentiment reflected in those big blue eyes. And a wave of despondency reminded Kate of her losses.

"Are you in love with him? I mean, I saw the two of you just now, out in the garden, and he seems to really love you."

Mally thought for a moment, her busy fingers gone still. "Yes," her voice dreamlike. "I suppose he does. He's been married before so there's a certain amount of cynicism there, but I think what we have is special. Unique." She nodded to her favorable explanation and finished the sandwiches.

"How do you know?" Kate asked.

"How do I know what?"

This time it was Kate's turn to tisk exasperation. "That what you have is special." She took the plate offered. She was hungrier than she realized. The smell of ham and the sharp spice of pickle made her stomach rumble.

"It just feels so right whenever we're together," Mally said before stuffing the bread in her mouth. "I love being with him," she managed to get out without spraying crumbs. "We have so much in common. And we talk. We talk about everything, anything and nothing. I know I can trust him. Why?"

Kate pressed her lips tightly together, wondering if she should expose her innermost thoughts, but she had to tell someone. Otherwise she'd burst. "Alex asked me to marry him."

Mally dropped what was left of her sandwich; her mouth hung open waiting for the food that had suddenly seemed to vanish. She didn't blink until her throat caught in a stutter and she lapsed into an unwelcome coughing fit. "He what?" she finally managed to get out after taking a drink of milk to soothe her voice. "What did you say? When?"

"Slow down," Kate said quietly, glancing over her shoulder into the foyer. She wanted to keep this a secret for the time being. "And don't say a word to Tim."

Mally crossed her heart. Then she waited for more.

Kate told her everything: the walk on the beach, the cave, his proposal, and her

misgivings. Mally's expression of enthusiasm faded as Kate finished. "I can't live here," she pleaded for her sister to confirm her doubt. "I can't just walk out on my old life after knowing someone for such a short time."

Mally's blonde brows folded and her eyes iced. "Your old life? And pray tell, what does *that* consist of? A part-time job you're not so keen on and watching the tide roll in and out in the evenings."

"I know it sounds mundane to you," Kate said without holding annoyance from her tone. "But the thing that scares me the most is...."

"Is he'll dump you like all the others. Yeah, yeah. Change the record."

"Wait a minute," Kate complained. "Don't say 'all' the others. Makes it sound far worse than what it was."

"Tell me, Katie. What does your gut say about this? I mean, do you believe him when he says he loves you? Do you love him?"

"I need more time," Kate said, feeling defeated.

Mally took a breath to argue but was interrupted by two distinct rumbling male voices in the foyer. They sounded amicable enough, but considering the confrontation of the afternoon before Kate froze and waited. Her relief manifested into a deep breath when laughter broke free. Then their anticipation was replaced with curiosity.

"We'll talk later," Mally said, jabbing her forefinger into Kate's arm.

Much to Kate's surprise, Tim and Alex were shaking hands. Whatever differences the two men felt about each other was appeased.

"Maybe they'll make good brothers-in-law after all," Mally whispered without acknowledging Kate's shocked expression. They were in the foyer before she had a chance to ask her sister to explain what that last comment meant.

"I haven't gone into the priest hole yet," Tim was explaining, the corners of his mouth straight without any hint of humor. "I thought it best to wait until you could accompany me."

Alex nodded approval, his stare fixed on the gap. "Aye, well. Perhaps I should." His attention was then diverted to the boxes cluttering the floor, and Tim took this as a cue to begin his explanation.

"I'm going to place a video camera here and here," Tim said, pointing to the walls near the stairwell, "so that they can continually record at different angles. I'll also put two cameras in the one bedroom upstairs because, as you say, this seems to be where most of the 'activity' is generated. They'll record all night long and we'll see what, if anything, is picked up. I've also put thermometers in these areas, as most sightings seem to be accompanied by cold spots."

Alex shook his head. "Will it all prove anything more than what we've told ye?"

"Probably not, but if something is picked up it will make me a very happy man." Tim smiled wryly. "Most sightings of this nature are reruns of an actual event and there appears to be an element of that here. For example, the rider across the moor towards the house, the smell of smoke, and footsteps on the stairs--all of this a carbon-copy repeat of that day in 1602. My colleagues and I have had many discussions about the reasons for these reruns. It could certainly be due to the fact there are certain environmental combinations that act as a recorder--humidity, copper in the wires or soil, magnetic fields--combined with the intense human emotion at the time, which is generated naturally by brain chemicals. The right combinations and then the scene plays, like



hitting the play button on a tape. Just no one has been able to prove which combinations, or even how they interact, in order to press that button.” He reached into one box and pulled out a compass. “But the fact you have actually interacted with the apparition....”

“Dougal,” Kate interrupted for the sake of respect. “His name is Dougal.”

Tim nodded. “And you, Kate, he seems to have broken from that rerun to interact specifically with you.”

She felt a shiver and wondered if the thermometer had dipped.

“So,” Tim went on, “those factors make these occurrences quite special, and I hope to collect as much evidence of independent paranormal activity as possible. Now, if you will allow, I must ask under what conditions these sightings have happened. Is it true they seem to have heightened since Kate got here?”

Alex threw a quick glance to Kate, and nodded. “Aye. I suppose they have.”

“And you had never heard Katrina before?”

Kate slipped her arm around Alex’s waist. It was tightening again. “No,” she answered. “Not until that one night when we were in the east wing.”

Tim blushed slightly as though he already knew what the answer to his next question would be, but for the sake of science he had to ask anyway. “I’m sorry for again sounding terribly personal,” his accent demure and polished, “but, what were you doing at the time?”

“Ye don’t have much imagination, do ye doctor?” Alex said without a hint of a smile.

Tim shifted his weight and glanced at an opened box. “I thought so, but I had to ask, and the reason I ask is because your union was probably what got her attention. Forgive me,” he said, holding his palms up in submission, “but who made love to whom?”

This time Kate blushed. No verbal answer was needed.

“Okay,” Tim continued. “If you will allow me to theorize... Alex has witnessed Dougal on a number of occasions because there is a bond between you of name, emotional status, maybe even brain chemistry, thus temperament. The same bond exists between Kate and Katrina. I suspect that Katrina was a strong willed woman, especially if it is true she left her clan, her home, her former life to elope with the man she cared so deeply about. I also suspect she was sexually secure and the fact that you, Kate, instigated the union with Alex, got her attention. The emotional reaction was similar to hers. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

Kate blurred from the conversation a moment. Katrina left her clan, her home, and her former life to live with the man she cared so deeply about. Kate peered helplessly at Mally, but her sister was too involved with Tim’s ongoing lecture to notice.

“Aye,” Alex answered. “But that’s all on the road behind us, doctor. To settle their woes, what do we do?”

“Right. We have to find out what it is they want. Obviously to get back together but only they know how that can be accomplished and I’m afraid,” Tim glanced between Kate and Alex, “it’s only you they want. But there’s a problem.”

Tim knelt beside the dark hole under the stairway and peered up at Alex. “Dougal MacTamhais died in the courtyard, correct?”

Alex nodded weakly.

“We’re pretty certain then of the time, the place, and why, because the preceding

clan war is well documented.”

“Aye.”

“What happened to Katrina?”

“There’s no certainty,” Alex explained. “Except she wondered off when the wee boy was fourteen, the anniversary of Dougal’s death.”

The hole in the wall seemed to sigh. Everyone looked at it except Tim, who kept his studious eye on Alex. “But you found her, didn’t you, Alex? She led you to the crypt beneath this house. Am I right?”

Alex nodded, his dark face draining.

Tim rolled his shoulder slightly as he, too, turned to glance into the inky blackness. “I’m sorry to have to be the one to tell you this, but she’s not down there alone.” He held the thermometer to the hole and Kate gaped in shocked horror as the red liquid fell as though immersed in ice. “Something very powerful is keeping them apart, and it’s extremely pissed off that we’re interfering.”

## Chapter Eighteen

Dr. Younger checked and rechecked a large flashlight with an incredibly white beam that seemed to want to illuminate everything within a hundred yard distance. He passed it to Alex and took out a smaller one for himself. "I'll follow you," he said, "seeing you've been there already and know the way."

"What about us?" Mally demanded, indignation in her tone. "Aren't we invited to play?"

"You really want to?" Tim asked.

Mally didn't seem to be having second thoughts about accompanying the men and Kate, hesitant as she was, dreaded the idea of staying behind alone. "Yes," came their voices in unison.

Alex led the way with Kate behind. Mally stepped into the pit next with Tim lighting her steps as he brought up the rear. No one spoke. Perhaps everyone had the change of temperature on his or her mind. It was the only difference Kate noticed from being there before, and she wished she had taken a moment to pull on a sweater. She suffered in silence, not wanting to be the one to break the odd serenity that filled the crypt.

When Alex shone the beam of light at the bones stretched beneath the long dress, Tim gasped with amazement. "Your missing clothes?" he said quietly, peering finally at the neatly folded denim on what was once her breast. A camera appeared from his pocket. There was no flash, simply a click. The flashlight seemed to be all the illumination that his camera required.

Alex nodded, his eyes fixated on a small tuft of auburn hair hanging from the skull's temple. "Aye. We have no explanation Doctor. I ne'er found the Priest Hole till the next day."

"Fascinating," Tim muttered before snapping another few photos. He directed his light to the empty resting places and then to the tunnel, which swallowed the beam almost instantly. "Have you been down there? Do you know where it leads?"

"Nay," Alex said, still staring at the remains. "We saw her laying there and that was enough for us. We havena been back since."

Tim moved closer to the entrance, shining the light around the walls and ceiling of the tunnel. "More than simply a priest hole. An escape route as well. It's very narrow but wide enough for one." He turned to Alex. "With your permission I'd like to follow it as far as I can. There seems to be a slight bend, and it might even have caved in farther ahead, but I'd like to have a look."

"Ye go ahead," Alex granted.

As Tim disappeared into the tunnel, Mally snuck along behind without asking. He reached round and took her hand, knowing full well she'd accompany him. Some things between couples didn't need verbalization.

Kate listened to their steps deaden. "I wonder how far it goes, and where it leads."

"I would guess to the edge of the moor, but there's really no telling." His voice drifted. He hadn't taken his eyes from what was left of Katrina. Empty sockets seemed to return his stare, as though they were communicating within the silence. Alex hadn't moved. He kept a respectful distance slowly scanning the remains with the thin white beam from his flashlight.

"Alex?" She nudged him, wanting to break his solemn trance.

"Um?"

"Are you going to get your clothes?"

"I dinna know whether or no to disturb her." He thought a moment and then added, "Although I suppose my interference is no going to torment her more."

As Alex pressed closer to her resting place Kate flinched at a sudden blast of icy air. She turned automatically, searching for the source. The tunnel? Or the hole under the stairwell? Or the malevolent force that Tim had so casually mentioned? Kate almost expected to see demonic red slits for eyes blink out from the black corners. Shuddering, she took a firm grip of Alex's arm and was comforted by the warmth and the strength that he so naturally radiated.

"Did you feel that?" she whispered, unable to shake the image of pernicious inhabitants watching them.

"Aye, it's damp here," Alex answered. He was too interested in Katrina to notice Kate's misgivings about the drop in temperature, so she made a concerted effort to ignore the goose bumps that crawled over her flesh.

Alex trembled slightly as he picked up the bundle. Bone beneath the sleeve of her dress moved at the disturbance, causing the material to ripple, magnified by Kate's heightened imagination. The crypt seemed to close in a bit and she felt herself sway.

The arm Kate clutched flexed with the back and forth movement of a cross. He whispered something in Gaelic before actually touching the dress. She couldn't understand what he said but inferred from the tone it was an apology, or a prayer of sorts, and Kate felt her heart tighten at the sound of his gentle emotional plea.

Respect, passion, devotion--there was no end to his incredible depth and wisdom.

Alex shone the light to the midsection. This time he whispered in a language she could understand. "Dear God, look at that."

Kate peered at the shredded material that once clothed her waist. The whiteness of the dress had faded to varying shades of yellow and brown and in some places it had rotted away completely. But here it was painfully obvious the material had been slashed, the rusty stain of long-dried blood still vaguely visible. A jeweled dirk lay half buried within material and behind collapsed bone. It had dropped within the cavity of her stomach as the flesh had rotted, and lay hidden with its mistress for centuries. Now it seemed to beg to tell them the secret it had held for so long.

"The poor tormented lass killed herself," Alex said softly. "She must have decided her son old enough to care for himself, so she came here to finally free her soul to be with Dougal." He gingerly plucked the blade up at one end but let it fall back again.

"Why here?" Kate asked, after quietly clearing the dry spot in her throat.

"I dinna know," Alex answered mechanically. "Except to spare family honor maybe. She wouldna want the MacTamhais name to be scorned, especially for her son." He stepped back but kept the beam on the small blade, the red jewel sparkled once as the

light caught a cut edge. "Suicide was a sin, but her love for him must have outweighed her fear of eternal damnation."

"Ironical, then," Kate mused, "That is, seeing she hasn't found peace after all."

"Aye. Poor lass."

"Alex!" Tim's voice echoed from the depths of the tunnel.

Kate startled at the sudden breakage of silence, shattering like a glass thrown into a brick wall. Alex immediately swung his light toward the source of the excitement and Kate's heart pattered double time. This was the first time she had heard Tim sound anything more than professional. Now there was definitely a hint of unrestrained animation. When he stepped into the opening he was puffing but his face reflected delight. "You must come and see this," he wheezed. "I didn't want to take it out of the earth without your permission."

"What?" Kate found it difficult to be patient. Then with a short leap of panic she noticed her sister wasn't within range. "Where's Mally? Is she okay?"

"Yes, she's fine. The tunnel doesn't really go that far and it's in amazing good shape." He was disappearing back into the darkness. "Watch your step, though," he called. "The floor is extremely slippery."

Kate's wrist was instantly warm as Alex led her down the tunnel. His shoulders bent necessarily as the arched ceiling dipped unevenly, but they kept a steady pace, listening to Tim's feet squish into trickles of dampness ahead. Unfortunately, his description of 'not far' wasn't what Kate would have used; they seemed to trudge on forever. Maybe it was because she maneuvered behind, stumbling as cautiously as possible with what little light squinted back to her. The concentration was making her head ache.

Finally Alex paused and Kate blundered blindly into his back with a thump.

Tim was looking up, his jaw dropped in wonder. "I would suspect," he stated, "that there would originally have been a ladder here." He pointed to a thin shaft of natural light above his head. "And even a trap door to keep the exit concealed. But if there was a door it's going to be more difficult to explain this." He shone the light on Mally's ankles and, buried within the earthen wall near where she stood guard, was the hilt of a sword, dull and tainted with moisture and time. "Because if this belonged to Dougal and was discarded down the shaft at the time of his death, then it makes our puzzle a little more complicated. Having said that, it could have belonged to anyone. I'm hoping there's some mark which would establish clan ownership. I thought you might know. Swords are not my area of expertise."

Alex stared intently at the handle and knelt to touch the tip. It reminded Kate of pictures of warriors being knighted, bending on one knee to receive their honored title.

Tim continued, leaning over Alex's shoulder. "I didn't want to touch it until you had a chance to look. But I do think we should pull it out."

"Aye, that we shall," Alex agreed and with the determined pawing of a dog digging a favorite bone, Alex's hands were soon black with stains of the earth. Within minutes the sword was freed and Alex's face was bright with the success of the discovery of such a fine treasure.

"Do you think it dates back to the early seventeenth century?" Tim asked, sharing Alex's joy. Both were grinning like children in a candy store.

"Let's get outside," Alex said. "I need to clean her off."

The exit above them was high enough to make crawling out awkward and messy although Alex looked for something to throw through the opening as a marker. He found a rock and hoisted it up; it landed on the soft earth outside with a dull thump and Kate wondered how he'd distinguish this one from a thousand other rocks. Before she asked they had started to follow the light back through the darkness like four moles scratching around for home, except one was armed.

Alex placed the weapon on the table with lingering care and affection. He found a cloth, dampened it under the tap with warm water, and began stroking the first layer of dirt away. Kate felt a slight tinge of excitement as she watched. He had touched her like that, the same long tender strokes, filled with commitment and passion, eyes wide with child-like wonder and she shifted uncomfortably at the realization that she was becoming aroused. Diverting her attention, she plugged in the kettle to make a cup of tea that she didn't really want.

Tim was watching as well. His small eyes flickered between the expression on Alex's face and the glistening blade. "It's a claymore, isn't it?" he asked.

"Aye, that she is." Alex swept his fingertips down the blade, which, to Kate's estimation, was a little over three feet long. The handle was almost another two feet and as Alex's fingers worked over the grit and dirt the pommel turned out to be in the shape of a thistle. By the time he finished polishing the whole weapon sparkled, from thistle to pointed tip.

"It's quite a find," Tim whispered. "Too bad the owner didn't scratch his name on it somewhere."

Alex was holding the sword erect, twisting the blade from side to side with admiration. It seemed to fit his hand. He maneuvered it with ease and grace. "He dinna have to," Alex said, never taking his gaze from the motion of steel. "I feel it in my heart; this was Dougal's own."

No one doubted Alex. The conviction of his voice was enough for the audience. A historian or collector would identify the era in which it was constructed but ownership was a topic for debate. Except for Alexander MacTavish. He was secure in his belief.

Tim rubbed palms mechanically up and down his legs and without doubt agreed. "The question begs, then, how did it get there?"

"And why?" Alex mumbled, shaking his head slowly. A lock of black hair fell from behind his ear and curled against his temple. "I would suspect," he went on, "that Bruce MacDaniells knew of the route. He may even have used it to get into the house that day, no? And after Dougal's death he threw it back into the earth." Alex pointed the tip into the hardwood floor and leaned on the handle, each side slanting down, its four circular designs dipped tempting his long fingers to slide slightly with the curve. "Not that it matters, doctor. But by recovering such a prized possession, I get the feeling we're halfway there."

Tim nodded. "I agree. It's certainly a bonus to have a personal object. It could come in handy later."

Kate wasn't sure exactly he meant by that but didn't like to interrupt the moment with a question.

"Forgive me," Alex said, lifting the sword again. "But I've had enough for today. If ye no be needing me, I shall take my lady and retire."

Seeing that Alex was peering lovingly at the sword, Kate wasn't certain if 'my

lady' meant the claymore or her.

"Certainly," Tim smiled. "Mally and I will finish setting up the cameras and we'll see what happens tonight."

"Aye. Fine. Till the morrow, then." Alex's dark eyes turned to Kate. Holding the sword in his right hand his left reached for her. "Come, my bonny love. I need ye with me."

Kate smiled in return and was again by his side, warm and safe, and wondering what the evening had to reveal.

\* \* \* \*

Alex cleared the top of a chest of drawers and placed the claymore on the dusty, laced runner. It stretched out on each side of the piece of furniture but appeared suited for the place of honor nonetheless. And although Alex wasn't touching it physically, he was memorizing every curve, twinkle, and edge with his stare. Sitting on the bed, his long brown fingers interlocked as he set his elbows on parted knees.

"I dinna know what it is, Ceitag. I get the feeling that if I sit quietly enough he will speak to me, now more so than ever. I already think he meant for me to have his weapon." Alex paused, rubbing thick thumbs into the bridge of his nose. "He would treasure it near as much as he would have treasured her. A Highlander's sword was part of his body. She would be part of his heart. Now we have found what remains of both." Alex stood abruptly and paced the room in meditation. "But how do they want us to put it all together?"

Kate slipped off her shoes and stretched lazily on the top cover of his bed. Crossing her arms behind her head, she said as softly as possible, "Let's try to forget about it for tonight." Then she winked as soon as she caught his attention.

Alex's knuckles curled against his narrow hips. "Aye. Ye're right." The mischievous twinkle flashed beneath his dark brow. He chuckled. "Fool that I am. Here I am concentrating so much on the past while the present slips through my fingers." His lips pressed into a sensual grin, filled with the familiarity of touch and promise and ecstasy.

Tugging the shirt loose, he pulled it off, shaking his head to loosen the hair, which seemed to have noticeably grown longer since Kate first set eyes on him. Curls washed against his neck and temple, one even dipping to his brow. And as he crawled provocatively along the bed towards her, she reached to greet the soft fine hairs of his chest. The sudden touch coaxed his nipples to harden, and Kate giggled as he crawled closer still, tickling her with puffs of hot breath.

"I shall no let ye slip through my fingers," he said. "I dinna care what ye say, either." Alex slumped beside her, half pinning her body with his weight. Clever fingers were already toying with her blouse. "Ye are mine, and ye shall ne'er forget that."

Alex was whispering now, the smile faded as dark cheeks flushed. "Mine," he repeated slowly before lazily lifting seductive eyes to hers. "Love me, Ceitag. As a woman should."

"I'm not sure what you mean by that, Mr. MacTavish," Kate teased. "Are you being chauvinistic again, by chance?"

"What if I am?" Full lips were already causing her to shiver uncontrollably by tickling her exposed throat. "Love, honor and obey? But I would ne'er ask ye to do anything ye wouldna want to do." The mischievous twinkle was back. "Besides,

wouldna ye want to do anything possible to keep me happy?"

"Anything? Well, within reason I suppose." Kate had twirled a lock of hair so tightly it was almost standing straight out. "What sorts of things do you have in mind?"

"Naughty things," he said without hesitation. "Private and passionate things that only those in love know how to do."

"Hm," Kate smirked. "And how would you know any of that, seeing I'm your first love?"

"I read, extensively." The tip of his tongue was searching past her lips. "And I dream a dream of ye." His chest full against her, palm to her jaw, he sighed before lunging deeper, grabbing a fistful of her hair and wrenching her chin up so that he could find every hidden corner of her mouth.

The moist cloud of sensuality had enveloped her senses again, and a flush of heat so powerful she thought she might faint from dizziness swept through her whole body. Although firmly braced against the hard mattress beneath, the bed seemed to shift with the continual motion of his growing assertion. Kate's arms tightened, every muscle pulling him closer, encouraging his gestures. Her sigh of contentment sounded much like a whimper and he drew back long enough to show his broad grin.

"I love it when ye make that wee sound, Ceitag," he whispered. "I hope I'm on the right tract to induce a bit more."

"Work harder," she chided without malice.

He did. The olive skin of his shoulders flexed as he writhed closer. She felt his torso, hard and firm against her softness, his fingers now loosening her clothes so that the flash of her paleness appeared strong in contrast to him.

Lips fluttered over her breasts and Kate closed her eyes, luxuriating in the wet pools. His touch gentle yet forceful, he told her with every intimate movement what he wanted: to explore, please, elicit her want. And want him she did.

"Alex?" she whispered, her mouth dry from the long intake of air.

But he ignored her, tasting her skin, the fine hairs that covered her stomach, the flesh that bumped to his arousing caresses.

"Oh, Ailigean." She loved the sound of his Gaelic name, the way it rolled from her mouth. And it seemed to stir him as well. Another intimacy they shared. Perhaps it was something she, and she alone, had uttered during moments like this. Her lover.

Blinded by mounting passion, she pushed him away. He startled at her aggression, taken off guard for the moment she needed to rise, to crawl to her feet, despite the fact the whole room shimmered. She turned to find him stretched on his side, propping his head with his palm, grinning. "What are ye doing?" he asked innocently. "Don't think about making a run for it, because I'll ne'er let ye get as far as the door."

She allowed her brow to furrow in exaggerated disgust. "As if," she said, "No. I want to drink in my prize."

Alex flopped to his back and held his arms out. "What ye see is what ye get."

"Remind me," she commanded, devilment within her heart.

The dark eyes narrowed; lips curled with a suggestive smile. "Whate'er milady wants."

"Tell me," she whispered, seductively wiggling out of what was left of her disheveled clothing. "Tell me what my chauvinistic lord prefers."

Alex's smile faded and Kate could tell there were cogs churning within his mind.



His mind. Was that not the most seductive place a man could have? The very suggestions of pleasures to come were enough to pulse against the temples, muscles to tighten. This time she would be the mistress in control of the body that had driven her to the edge of insanity and back.

“What are ye thinking?” he rasped. He swallowed with difficulty but she could see the spell was working. The dark pupils had grown, suggesting the lust-laden hope from within.

“Not until you are ready....”

After a frozen pause, and without breaking the wanting stare, he, too, wiggled from his clothes. And there he was, full length, the very picture of masculinity, mind whirling in tangled fantasy and body hard for response.

“Ye’re teasing me,” he said threateningly. “And I can see ye mean to do just that.”

“Aye,” she answered. “Because it’s just one of those naughty things two people in love do to each other.”

He had a long way to go to exude any remnants of shyness. All of his nakedness was blatantly on display and he seemed to wallow in self-assurance. And why not? This was the man who pleased her, took her within his arms, made her a part of him, and promised that the reward would be bliss. Just looking at him stirred a pleasure she had never known. And now she would explore more, as he had wanted, asked with silent pleas.

Starting with his foot, she massaged each perfectly shaped toe. As the pressure deepened he relaxed and sighed. “That feels good,” he muttered. “But ye’re too far away.”

Kate floated her fingertips up the tight cords of his calves, under his knees, and hesitated long enough to hear the erotic gurgle that caught in his throat. Sliding higher, she saw his chest heave, his clouded expression demanding to know her intention, yet deep within actually knowing. His jaw dropped in expectation as she crawled higher on his body.

She dug her nails into the tight skin on his thighs, fluttering her tongue over the dark hairs, drawing ever nearer, and he watched her approach. “Ceitag?” he called quietly, his voice strangled. But he made no motion to guide her actions. Her desires. Her purpose. He would give her totality and find bliss in whichever way she chose.

Privacy. Intimacy. There were no secrets between them now.

Her eyes closed, she felt him ball the covers in strong fists. Air drawn quickly through his clenched teeth, he fell back into the pillow, a deep moan rippling the air. Now her mind seduced, she had to induce more, as he wanted. His groin thrust to her she could not, would not deny his pleasure, for his solace was a part of her now. There was nothing she would hold from him.

Nothing.

Every taste bud exploded with his scent, the saltiness of his flesh, and the musk of maleness overpowered her senses. Pushing her body against his legs the muscles flinched slightly. Strong fingers tugged her hair, encouraging more.

Lost. Nothing existed bar him and the isolation of the moment.

Finding her hand, he gripped it with such ferocity she thought perhaps it might snap free. But the gesture assured his nearness, his approval that action was stronger than

words, their affinity confirmed. And his voice was deep, erotic and full of sexual appreciation.

This lovemaking was of the deepest of her commitments. A silent understanding that despite her misgivings she was a woman who could love. He was hers and with every kiss, with every stroke, with every tender gesture, she promised to be his, and that his pleasure was her goal.

"Oh, Ceitag," he moaned, the voice unrecognizable through the haze. He let go of her hand and rolled with great effort to one side. "Come here," he begged. "Please."

Kate pulled higher still and found her cheek buried within the wispy black map of his chest. The heart beneath dove furiously against the ribcage, the same beating she now felt pushing to her body in eagerness. A hand found her parted thighs and stroked the sensuality within. "Ye drive me wild."

"Good." She pressed her lips to his throat, flowing at the push that resulted with her body open and prostrate before him.

The silken edge of his erection touched her flesh and like the growing fury of a crash of thunder he rose and then pushed, needing her with a desperation that instantly robbed her lungs of air. Pinned beneath the flexing hardness, she moved only her fingers, stroking the now moist curves of his fluctuating backbone. Overcome with fervor, he seemed to have lost all control of his own movements. She succumbed, willingly, to his power. She had stirred this creature to life so now she must enjoy the fruits of her labor. And enjoy she did.

Her breasts were flattened beneath the damp film of muskiness. Nails embedded in his back, she arched the curve of her spine to welcome his passion. And when his words reached her ear she whimpered with gratification.

"I love ye," he moaned with each rhythmic pulse. The air hung rich with his passion. "Ye are mine. Your lips, your mind, your heart." His hands groped for her nape and held her hair. "My body in ye will mark ye forever."

His rough tone was surreal. Kate snapped her eyes open as though to check this man bearing down on her was indeed the one she knew. It was, but the voice was deeper, the accent more pronounced. "Mine," it growled.

Her womb tightened, the beginning throes of her heightened ecstasy. Each thrust farther, harder, more determined. Ten nails dug into his flesh to warn him she would soon enter his paradise. Teetering on the brink, their groans intertwined. Her head automatically flew back and with a wild heave she cried out as his wave filled and flooded her soul.

"Katrina," he muttered, lips pressed tightly against her hair.

Stuck somewhere between the numbness of lovemaking and the confusion of horror, Kate stiffened in shock. Blocked by his weakening, she was immobile, and he, oblivious to what he had uttered, sighed loudly in release.

"Alex!" She had wanted to scream but all that came out was a harsh, dry squeak.

Except for rough breath he did not respond to the name. Sealed beneath his thick chest, she squirmed in hope of gaining enough leverage to push the crushing weight from her, but he tightened his hold, each bicep flexing in unison. Wet lips found the curve of her neck and he kissed the skin there, rolling the tip of his tongue under her earlobe.

"Katrina," he muttered again, while Kate squeezed her eyes shut from the waking nightmare, biting her bottom lip so fiercely she was unaware of lost circulation. She

couldn't look at him. Fear had taken hold deep within her chest. What if she were to open her eyes and see, not Alex, but ... the very thought was too grotesque. Successfully blocking out the visual, she could not wrench free from the voice. "My wife. My own. Forgive me. Come back. Say ye 'ave no forgotten me."

"Alex," Kate tried again before slipping into total madness. "Please, Alex, you're scaring me."

Something between an agonizing moan and a fierce growl gurgled up from within the chest that kept her prisoner against the sheets.

"Dear heart, I canna find ye."

The pain of the plea made Kate want to scream and cry and run all at the same time. She was drenched with the distress behind the voice, the deep yearning, and the painful desperation. None of this made sense. Was Alex falling into his past of torturous memories or was someone else funneling their misery through his mind? Was he awake? She twisted her head in an attempt to find once sensual eyes.

His cheek was bent to her shoulder, the rounded fullness of his lips quivered with silent words. And his eyes were open, staring at her with such adoration that all fear swept from her heart. She reached, slow motion, to rub her knuckles slowly across the strained cheekbone, and smiled with assurance that crept warmly from within.

Tears shimmered within the black pools, and when he smiled at her silent promise the lids closed, forcing the drops to trickle down the muscles of his cheeks.

Such sympathy filled Kate's heart that she reached to this man, pulled his head closer, cradling the now wet face to her breast. As though listening to someone else her voice whispered, "Soon, dear love. Soon."

One last gasp, the heavy shoulders shivered and slumped into her warm embrace. His muscles loosened, bit by bit, and finally he slept.

Kate found the edge of the blanket and pulled it over their shoulders, suspecting the tremors of released fear would soon torment her nerves. But she felt surprisingly calm as the man within her arms quietly slept, the peace he needed found, if only temporarily.

She couldn't think. She wouldn't. This was Alex and she loved him. Deeply. Forever.

My love. My own.

Before she drifted to sleep, she stroked the tangled lock of hair that curled over his cheek, kissing the tip so that the strand brushed silk between her lips. Then the rhythmic breath against her chest lulled her to a dreamless oblivion.

## Chapter Nineteen

Both Alex and the claymore were gone when Kate finally woke. Her first thought consisted of the time, the second was love, and then she bolted upright to the third--the unfamiliar voice that had possessed the man she thought she knew.

"A-Alex?" she called, stuttering with the stark realization that nerves were going to get the better of her senses.

Dressing was done with complete automation. There was a blotch of purple on her thigh, and although the bruise wasn't as sore as the muscle in her limbs, it still ached. Pausing, her knees buckled, forcing her to clutch the crumbled sheet of the bed. Previous to his odd words, the unfamiliar tone to his voice, was his lovemaking. Last night had been fervid, emotional, frenzied and she was melting at the tickle in her womb which shuddered with the onslaught of memory.

Kate's hand pressed to her breast as she gathered her thoughts, sorting out the order of events. The crypt, the tunnel, the sword, their return to the stables--and then she had aroused his passion, teased him into submission before he took control, as he always seemed to do. Then the voices, present and past.

*Katrina was a strong willed woman ... I also suspect she was sexually secure ... the emotional reaction was similar to hers....*

*Brain chemistry ... temperament ... they're reaching out to you...*

*But there's something else ... and it's extremely annoyed we're interfering...*

"Okay," Kate mumbled aloud, perching on the end of the bed. A vision of Alex knelt in the garden, fingers clutching the phantom slash across his throat, the sound of his words when she had frantically tried to get him to his feet. "This has happened before," but the fact was far from settling. He had no memory of it yet. What of last night?

Kate hurried to the courtyard. The car was tucked lovingly in the garage side of the stables, so unless Alex was in the Hall... She scanned the yard and then checked the back.

Silhouetted against the light blue of the mid-morning sky, Alex's figure loomed, oblivious to his surrounding except for the sword. Both hands gripped the handle, his head bent as though in prayer, he and the weapon motionless.

Kate's feet froze to the ground while she watched with awe as he thrust it forward, stabbing an invisible foe with a furious wrath. The grace was that of a professional dancer. He held the sword effortlessly in front of his chest and spun, pirouetting round, the sword a dance partner unable to join his step yet leading each. Then his knee bent as he stabbed it gracefully forward again.

The tempo of the silent music changed; Alex lifted his left hand for balance and slashed the blade from side to side with every assertive plunge. Kate could hardly follow his movements. The frantic charge seemed a blur.

A ray of sunlight caught the steel as Alex turned and the flash of white caught her with a momentary blindness. Squeezing her eyes closed, her hand immediately shot up to protect her eyes from another assault. She must have made some noise, for he stopped and

called her name.

"How long have you been out here?" she asked, noticing that his T-shirt clung to his body with spots of sweat. A dark line streaked straight down his spine.

Exhilarated by the exercise, Alex was catching his breath while grinning broadly as she drew closer. "About an hour," he gasped. "I finished cleaning her and decided to see if there was any life to her yet. She's a beauty, Ceitag."

"Should I be jealous?" Kate smiled, trying to appear serious, but his lightened mood was far too infectious for her to keep a sober face.

"Nay, precious." Sweaty arms clamped around her shoulders. His heart was hammering through the damp T-shirt. "Ye are more beautiful." He pinched her hip. "And softer. More suitable for night-time games."

"Really know how to sweet talk a girl, don't you?" Kate squinted into the bright sunlight as they headed back to the stables. "Alex, I have to talk to you about last night."

"Oh, aye? Fancy more, do ye?"

"Do you remember everything? I mean ... did you ... did you call me Katrina on purpose?"

Alex stopped short, the flush of exercise drained from his face. "What did ye say?"

She had hoped she wouldn't have to repeat her question. It was too absurd anyway. Why would he deliberately call out another name, particularly one who had been dead for four hundred years? But his brow knitted so tightly together it nearly became one long line across his forehead. The question would have to be repeated and explained.

"You called me Katrina," she said, trying to smile as though it didn't really matter, "at a rather inopportune moment. And your voice was deeper, harsher. It's just, you frightened me a bit."

Kate could clearly see by the blankness of his expression that he remembered nothing. She told him what had happened, how she spoke his name, but his foreign muttering continued, and he had finally wept within her arms.

Alex shook his head in speculation. "Nay. I could no have...." The remaining thought fell away.

Kate cleared her throat and said what she suspected Alex was thinking. "I guess Dougal is using you again to vent his ... desires." This figure from the past was becoming all too familiar. He had penetrated their thoughts, conversations, dreams, and now he was interfering in their love life, all without invitation. He was quickly becoming a nuisance as far as Kate was concerned. "He's getting closer," she sighed. "Too close for comfort."

"Aye," Alex mumbled numbly, opening his arms for her. "Seems he's following us. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault," she said, stepping submissively into his embrace. "I'm getting frightened, however. It's one thing to see or hear a ghost in an old house. It's quite another to have one make love to you."

Hidden within his arms Kate tried not to let the evening's events wash through her mind. Alex's hands stroked her back while they stood there, in the courtyard, the summer sun gaining strength. During the daylight hours she was safe from intrusion, but now, even with Alex in the stables, the haunting was closer.

“We’ll go talk to the doctor,” Alex said after much deliberation. “See if his wee cameras caught anything. Then we’ll tell him what happened.” Kate saw his brow lifted with question. “If that’s okay with ye.”

She nodded and fell back into his chest, just for a while longer, knowing that as soon as she left this warm protected place, her stomach would twist in embarrassment. Their love was private, their secrets their own. The thought of having to share that was infuriating, and she hated the long gone lovers for forcing her to do so.

“Okay. I don’t want to, but I guess we have little choice.”

A quick squeeze and Alex was guiding her to the Hall. “Something’s got to give, Ceitag, and soon.”

How true, she thought. Her return flight was scheduled for Sunday, only five days away.

\* \* \* \*

Tim was sitting with his back braced into the corner of the couch, reading. He held his book with one hand while the other strummed Mally’s shoulder as she slept, head propped against his chest. It was a pleasant scene of domestic bliss, and Kate was apologetic for interrupting. She slipped onto the chair nearest Tim, while Alex got them coffee.

“She didn’t sleep well,” Tim whispered, as though he had to explain their actions. “Up half the night feeling ill.” His caress paused as he lowered his eyes to peer into the fluttering lids. She stirred, pressing her cheek tighter against his shirt and sighed before falling motionless again.

“Is she coming down with something?”

Tim shook his head. “I don’t think so. Nerves. She kept saying she had an unsettling feeling something dreadful was about to happen. Nothing I could say would calm her down.”

“Maybe she’s not the tough ghost hunter she thought she was,” Kate said, a sympathetic edge to her tone. She had the suspicion the doctor was pushing more onto her than he should. Mally came off as being big and brave, but Kate had her doubts, especially confirmed now.

Reading her expression Tim complied. “This is quite new for her, I realize that. She’s more disconcerted by all this than she let’s on.”

For an instant Kate disliked him. Despite Mally’s education and vivacious personality there was a great vulnerability to her little sister, and Kate often felt it was her responsibility to watch out, make sure she wasn’t used, hurt, taken advantage of. This man was too mature, too set in his beliefs, too secure, and Mally would drive herself into a frenzy trying to keep up with him. Disconcerted was putting it all mildly.

“No, I’m not,” came a groggy, muffled voice.

Tim smiled when she opened one sleepy lid and then sank back into her human pillow. “Why don’t you go to bed for awhile?” he said kindly. “I’ll wake you for lunch.”

Tangled blonde hair flopped over Mally’s face as she rose. She looked a bit like a scarecrow, one that had been drinking too much as opposed to not sleeping. “I think I will,” she said, with half-opened eyes. “But call me if anything exciting happens.” With that she stumbled up the stairs.

Tim must have realized he was being carefully scrutinized. He shifted uncomfortably several times before prodding Kate. “I suppose you’re wondering, about

Mally and I,” he said, and added, “and you think I’m too old for her.”

“It has crossed my mind,” Kate said.

Alex passed coffee to both of them and then sat unobtrusively against the wall, flipping open a newspaper. This was a conversation he was curious to hear but politely decided not to participate in.

“I don’t know what Mally has told you,” Tim began, “But I will put my cards on the table. I’m pulling in a few favors at the University to help secure the position as lecturer for her. Partly because she is certainly qualified but my intentions are not completely altruistic. I have asked her to move to Edinburgh and live with me.”

Kate had just taken a sip of coffee and upon hearing the revelation she choked, emanating a brown spray from her nostrils. Thrusting the cup to the table she accepted the serviette offered and waited for the stinging to stop before trying to speak. “I’m sorry,” she rasped. “It’s just, I wasn’t expecting that.”

Tim leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, and continued without humor. “I’ve been married before and have three children. My ex-wife is Scottish and lives in Berwick.”

A rustle of paper showed the last comment had gotten Alex’s attention. His dark eyes peered over the top of the paper in a moment of surprise and then lowered quickly again.

“She left me.” He didn’t offer the reason. “I’ve been isolated for several years, my only enjoyment my research, but Mally has changed my attitude about relationships.”

“None of this is endearing me to you,” Kate said matter-of-factly, dabbing her nose.

Tim interlocked his fingers before continuing. “Your sister is the breath of fresh air I thought I’d never know. She has reminded me life is to be enjoyed and cherished.” He glanced down at his hands and blushed faintly. “If she says yes, I promise to do everything in my power to make her happy.”

Kate didn’t doubt what he said to be true. His voice oozed sincerity and she was instantly warmed by his deep conviction.

“I love her, very much,” Tim said softly. “I only hope she will agree before Sunday.”

She felt Alex’s eyes burrowing holes into her face but was too embarrassed to meet them. She twirled her coffee mug, wondering what to say next, and to whom.

Alex broke the silence. “Why Sunday, doctor?” His eyes remained fixated on Kate.

“Goodness!” Kate exclaimed loudly, obvious in her intent to divert the topic. “Never rains but it pours, eh? Two poor old spinster girls find love and romance in one full swoop. Who’d have thought?” She laughed nervously at her pathetic attempt at making a joke.

“Why Sunday?” Alex repeated. The paper had been discarded completely now.

Kate slumped, meeting his continuing seriousness with a weak smile. “Because,” she said resolutely, “that’s the date we’re scheduled to fly out.”

Except for a small twitch in the corner of his mouth, Alex remained frozen. Her heart sank when he coldly disregarded what she had said and returned his attention to the printed news. She was certain he wasn’t reading it, simply using it as a shield. The headlines seemed to tremble a bit but the pages weren’t turned.

Desperate now to change the topic Kate smiled to Tim and said cheerfully, "From what Mally has told me, Doctor Younger, I think she loves you, too."

He nodded and smiled with satisfaction, yet he plainly sensed the atmosphere within the room had changed dramatically. "From what the tapes recorded," he said with tact, "nothing out of the ordinary happened here last night. I must admit I am rather disappointed. I really had expected something."

"That's because he followed us, doctor," Alex said sternly from behind the paper.

Tim turned a questioning glance to Kate.

The moment of confession had arrived and she assumed she'd get no encouragement from the ghost's medium in the corner. "Yes, well." Kate tried to brush away a growing shyness. "Alex seems to have taken on Dougal's persona again."

Thoroughly interested, Tim waited. He hadn't even blinked.

Keeping her attention on her twiddling thumbs, Kate started. "We were making love," she whispered, "and Alex's voice changed. He called me Katrina, then wife, and said he was afraid I had forgotten him, that he couldn't find me." Kate cleared the dry spot in her throat. "It was as though he were talking to Katrina. I was actually quite frightened."

Tim's normally small eyes had doubled in size. He leaned back with a heavy gasp. "Fascinating," he muttered, turning to the paper.

The clock in the foyer chimed eleven times, its progress robbing all occupants of speech. When it had stopped its delicate singing, the two men were peering intently at each other.

"This is the second time, then," Tim said.

"Aye, so I'm told." Alex put the paper down and focused dark, troubled eyes on the coffee cup.

Kate tried unsuccessfully to get Alex's attention, to smile assurance, let him know her heart was still filled with only him. But he would not look at her. Bitterness, stark and raw, flooded out from him. He sat straight and firm, his forehead creased with concentration. There was no hint of happiness in his full lips. She wanted to go to him, hold him and say everything would be all right, but he had become dispassionate and it frightened her.

"You have no memory of these things you said last night?" Tim asked.

"Nay." He finished his coffee and slammed the mug on the table. "I have no recollection of it at all. And to be quite honest, I am getting fed up with the whole thing." Alex stood, nearly knocking his chair over and said through gritted teeth, "Perhaps the best thing to do is torch the place." He rolled blazing eyes to Kate. "One great bonfire before ye leave."

Ah, she thought. That confirmed her suspicion. She hadn't told him the date on her ticket and he was angry to discover it through Tim. The wall had gone up to protect what was left of his weakened heart. He had concluded she would honor the date on the ticket and would soon be gone. And why not? She hadn't told him otherwise.

Kate was on her feet in a flash, barring him from his sulking retreat. "Wait just one minute," she whispered, fingertips pressed into his chest as though some super strength would hold him down. "Don't be like this."

"Don't be like this!" he snapped. "How the hell do ye expect me to be? Ye're leaving, aren't ye? Planned it all along, regardless of everything between us. Were ye



going to tell me, or simply slip away in the night?"

"No! Alex, please. That's not fair."

"Nay. Ye're right. It is no fair, I agree. Now, if ye'll excuse me, I want to be alone awhile." He brushed past, leaving her to helplessly watch him go.

"I'm so sorry," Tim said. He had crept up behind her, gently placing his hand in condolence on her shoulder. "I didn't mean to cause trouble."

"No," she sighed in regret. "This isn't your fault. I caused this, all on my own." She managed a short smile before following Alex out towards the moors.

\* \* \* \*

He wasn't difficult to find. To a casual observer it would look as though he was searching for something in the tangled mass of heather beneath his feet. Each step was deliberate and poised. If he saw her approaching he gave no indication.

By the time she got close enough to speak he had knelt, pulling out handfuls of weeds to free what she soon saw to be the exit to the buried tunnel. It wasn't far from the edge of the garden but certainly a respectable enough distance that, in its day, would be a formidable escape.

Kate knelt on the other side, more interested in him than the hole in the earth.

Without acknowledging her he continued to pull small shrubs away and when satisfied the pit was fully exposed he sat down at the edge and threw a long look at her. "Do ye think she'll want to live with him?"

Kate shrugged. "I really don't know. I expect so."

"Then she'll be wanting her part of the estate." It wasn't a question, more of a statement. "Ye have no told me your intentions. About the house, I mean. I offered to buy your share. That's still on the table. Contract's written. Just needs your signature. I'd be grateful if ye'd do so before ye leave." His resignation was breaking her in two.

"Alex, I never said I was leaving yet."

"Yet," he repeated. "Aye. But it's only a matter of time though. Tell me one thing, did ye e'er think ye might have stayed, or was this all just a bit o' fun?"

"Surely you don't mean that, Alex. Do you really think I've been playing with you? Because if you're going to accuse me of being so cruel, after all we've...."

"Then tell me otherwise, Ceitag," he interrupted. "Right now I feel as though that sword has twisted right through my stomach." He blinked several times before turning his gaze to a small clump of grass. "I've poured it all out to ye--my past, my burden, my dreams--more than I should have, and maybe that was wrong. But I wanted ye to be part of my life, such as it is. I've ne'er felt like this about anyone and I'm sorry, but if ye go...." Rounded shoulders heaved with a heavy intake of air. "If ye leave me, I'll be empty." He peered into the hole, light fading to shadow. "I hurt already, Ceitag. Just thinking ye'll go despite ye being here with me now, I hurt." His face contorted, evidence of the pain within his heart. "Is there no hope?" he asked, merely a whisper.

"Of course there is," she protested. "Alex, I've told you how I feel. I love you madly, it's just I'm torn. Please be patient with me the next few days." Kate wanted to throw herself into his arms, beg him to forget her misgivings and hesitations, but a cloud had formed and she felt that her words would not cause it to dissolve quickly enough.

He stiffened and pulled himself up. "I love ye. There's nothing more I can say. What happens next is in your hands." He nodded and made an attempt to smile. "I trust ye, my own. I will continue to trust ye and believe that your decision, either way, will be

from your heart.”

Kate rose as well and went to him, locking her arms around his waist. He held her and it was a precious moment despite his hurt. And as they started back to the hall, Kate whirled at what she thought was someone in the distance, watching them. But by the time she focused on the horizon the small, dark shadow was gone and she brushed the incident completely away.

## Chapter Twenty

Alex watched the window begin to lighten. He had slept, but not long. Victoria's distorted, bruised face had smiled to him in another dream and he woke with a jolt that left a cramp in both legs. But the warm, soft curves beside him reassured that the images from his mind would fade within the past, where they should be, and the light was a promise of a new day dawning.

Another day closer. Would she really leave?

Alex pulled the covers over her bare shoulder, and she automatically turned towards his motion. She smiled in her sleep and murmured something; he smiled back, stroking her hair so gently as not to disturb her dream.

She couldn't go. He would forbid it. If he had forbidden Victoria from leaving that fateful night she would still be alive. If he had gone to collect her small treasures then the confrontation with Owen MacGregor would have ended before it began. If he had gone with her that monster would never have tried to hurt her. If she had lived so, too, would his child. If.

Hindsight. Alex tried to push the memory away. Why did it all feel as though it happened yesterday? Time played cruel jokes with him.

Time. Little of it left with Ceitag if she truly had her will set on leaving. He told her he wouldn't beg for her to stay, wouldn't repeat his proposal, would try to keep some remnant of pride but maybe he had been wrong. Watching the shadows across the delicate features of her face begin to fade, he considered begging. Anything to convince her to stay. Force, if he must.

If he had forced Victoria that night...

The past repeats itself, maybe not exactly, but close enough to induce similar emotions. And if he had learned nothing, why the sense of suffering? Suffering builds character, strength; in it we find wisdom. Odd words from a drunken derelict, one he met up with while living rough on the streets of London. Sometimes precious gems can be found in odd places.

Every man has a story. Every man has a past. Not every man has learned from it.

Alex watched his hand slide gently over the blanketed curve of her hip. As far as he was concerned, she was perfectly shaped--firm pert breasts, narrowed waist, broad hips, combining into a voluptuous hourglass. He loved touching every part, tasting her, breathing in the smell of her hair, making love to her. Just the thought of her writhing beneath him.... If he didn't stop he'd have to wake her.

The window was brighter now. Birds were cheerfully beginning their songs.

A smile tugged Alex's face. Chauvinistic. She had called him that several times. And egotistical. And perverted. He hadn't seriously considered any of those characteristics could be attributed to him. Except maybe chauvinistic. She could be right with that one. He did believe women were weaker, but a fragile wondrous weaker. One in which to hold, protect, surround, cherish, love. He had never considered this a negative quality. Deep down she understood.

His hand was on her hip again, firmer this time. He didn't want to wake her, yet he did. The chauvinist within was battling a growing desire. Alex pushed his abdomen against her back. Would she sense his arousal and wake? And want him in return?

He had made love to countless women but had never loved, in the true sense of the word, until now. And loving her so deeply and so passionately made him feel as though sex was a whole new experience. A virgin. He had been one all his life, and didn't have the sense to realize it.

"I love ye," he whispered into her hair, pressing his forearm against her bosom while snuggling closer into her back. But she hadn't stirred. His coaxing wasn't working.

Now he reviewed the motions of her body within his mind. The way she kissed him, the taste of her lips, the velvet fluttering over his knees and groin and nipples. And the more vivid his memory the faster his heart raced. She had to wake, soon.

Alex gave his hand permission to fall to her stomach. His fantasy grew extreme and he indulged the notion of the hardened curve of his growing seed within. He thought little or nothing about birth control. Never did. Was that not a woman's responsibility? That was his chauvinism surfacing again and it had never been an issue. Until Victoria. A small wave of familiar regret washed through his chest, tightening it with a short quick spasm. When she told him her baby was his, and he recovered from the shock, he soon delighted in the idea of a wife, a child, and a home. And then the whole scenario was snuffed away in one violent second.

But now--he stared over her shoulder at lashes fluttering against her smooth cheeks. She hadn't told him whether or not she had protected herself. Alex's heart hammered double time with a leap. If she were with his child she would have to stay, and he would have the home and the family he had always wanted. And this time he had love as well. At last his life would be complete.

"Oh, Ceitag," he whispered, his voice flooded with the pain of need. His fingertips stroked her stomach with faint hope. "Please tell me ye are careless just this once, with me."

She twisted and sighed heavily, then fell quiet again.

No, Alex mused. She must wake soon. He needed her too much to let her sleep.

With a hard swallow, Alex plucked sensual courage and slid his hand beneath the covers and bunched her gown in his fingers, pulling it first to her thigh and then farther, just enough to excite him even more, if that were possible. Naked under the cotton, the softness of her bare flesh, exposed from the waist down and his hand clutching her breast under the fabric.

Her lids cracked open and she smiled, pressing her buttocks back into his groin. To show how he ached for her, Alex kissed her ear and moaned softly, knowing it would tickle her and she would squirm, despite shaking away sleepiness.

"I want ye," he begged. Yes, he could beg. And he would. He had to. No pride where this passion was concerned, only need, and a desperate desire to keep his treasure--forever.

She started to turn but he held her firmly on her side. "No," he coaxed. "I'll take ye from behind, this way." And his hand slid to her thigh, directing one knee to rise. He wiggled closer, positioning him towards the space she offered, willingly. Had she sensed his want in her sleep, or had she gotten this wet since waking? It didn't matter. Her

excitement was for him, because of him, and he was not about to disappoint either of them.

Her fingers wrapped around his hand, and he felt her spine curve slightly to rise to him. There was no time for foreplay, or words. Their need for each other suddenly became incredibly raw and primeval. And Alex knew enough of his own body to know this would not take long.

The first stroke inside her body went deep and she gasped, that small squeak that told him she approved and found his offering acceptable. He paused, as difficult as it was, gyrating his hips in circular motions, his stomach flat against her backside, trying to contain the pressure that was quickly building in his groin.

She pushed his hand to her parted legs and pressed his fingers between the folds of her wet flesh. Holding his hips as quietly as possible to contain himself, he did as she silently required and stroked her, feeling her shiver in ecstasy against his chest. As she sighed, her womb tightened. His cue now, he pushed forcefully, rocking her whole body in doing so, each wave rippling through her with erotic violence.

Instantly he erupted. And weakened. She could have stabbed him repeatedly with his sword and he would be incapable of lifting his hand to protect himself.

*But his life was in her hands anyway, and the hands of her baby, now nearing time. She had told him it was a boy, one who would settle clan disputes and be a great warrior and his breast had puffed with pride.*

*She would soon stop him from having his way with her. The hardness of her growing belly was causing much pain in her back. But this position was fine for now. She sighed as he had entered her, spooned against her back, curled into her buttocks. She had whispered to him that his body pulled her spine with soothing rhythmic flutters and the pleasure induced was luxurious. And how he wanted to please her, as she had pleased him. But soon, the fullness of her stomach would insist he had to wait.*

*Another month and the baby would be with them.*

*In the lull after their lovemaking he stroked the full long line of her body and smiled eternal gratitude. "I love ye, Katrina. I will ne'er let ye leave my side."*

The vision shattered in a piercing scream. "Alex!"

He shuddered uncontrollably and focused on Kate, her eyes wide and wet with trepidation. "Stop it!" she cried, and he shook, startled to see the fear emanating from her contorted expression.

His tongue thick with stupor, he reached for her while calling to the best of his ability. "Ceitag? What's wrong?"

"It's happened again," she said. "That voice. You called me Katrina. I can't." She was backing away, into the shadow of the corner, her robe pulled protectively around her shivering body. "This scares me too much. You scare me."

Alex's forehead pounded. This was frightening him as well, but he didn't want her to know it. He rubbed his knuckles furiously into his aching sockets. "It's okay now. It's me. I'm here."

"For how long?"

The room was brighter still. "How long was I...?"

"We have to talk to Tim," she pleaded. "He's got to be able to do something."

Anxious to pacify her fear and bring her back into the circle of his arms he nodded and held out his hands. "Aye. We will. Please, Ceitag. Hold me." She leapt to

him. "I'm so sorry. I ne'er want to frighten ye, ye know it to be true."

"I know. Alex, don't be angry with me. Promise never to be angry. I can't stand that."

Regret for his moodiness of the previous afternoon flooded through him as he cradled her close to his chest. Twining a clump of her hair within his fingers, he tugged her chin up so that she had to look him straight in the face. He would say this again and again and again if he had to, despite what she might think. His heart commanded him. "Ceitag. Ye're my own. Ye just dinna realize it yet. But ye will, and we will always be a part of each other. Do ye hear me?"

She nodded, blinking back glistening pools in her eyes. He knew she fought tears. She was too strong willed to want to show weakness. To her, tears meant vulnerability and she tried to be so strong.

"We were meant to be together," he continued, ensuring his voice remained calm despite the growing fervor in his heart and mind. "Ye know it as well as I, it's just ye're too stubborn to tell me."

She laughed, but then the smile faded. He held her again and kissed her hair. "By Sunday," he murmured, "Ye will no hold a ticket in yer hand because my ring will be there instead."

\* \* \* \*

Tim listened in muted fascination. This time Alex did the talking. He had to. Ceitag was growing emotionally drained and he needed to be her strength. After all, he was the cause of her anxiety, and if the doctor had any realistic ideas to calm all their trepidations, then bring it on.

"If ye have any suggestions, doctor, I am willing to listen."

"As a matter of fact," Time muttered thoughtfully, "I do."

Mally finished making sandwiches, decorating the oval platter with an assortment of pasties and pickles, and placed her creation on the table in easy reach. Alex wasn't awfully hungry. His nerves had clamped his stomach shut but he washed down two egg and watercress sandwiches with a mug of black tea, more to be polite than to satisfy hunger.

All eyes had turned to Tim. Except for Mally--she rarely took her eyes from him to begin with.

"Since Dougal has been using your voice as a form of communication without your permission, I think we should make the attempt to give him free range, let him proceed at will, and then see what he has to say."

"I dinna understand. What are ye getting at?"

"Hypnosis," Tim answered bluntly. "If you are a suitable candidate, that is, which I believe you probably will be."

The only time Alex had ever seen someone hypnotized was for sadistic humor. A woman on the television had been convinced she was a chicken and clucked and strutted around a stage to the wild amusement of an audience. Alex had considered it absurd then. His opinion remained the same.

Tim leapt in with an uncanny ability to read thoughts. "This won't be a stage performance," he said. "Under my direction and guidance, I think I can draw him out and ask him a few questions directly, through you. He seems to want to use you as a medium anyway. If it works I can try asking him what it is he needs to find peace."

The room fell eerily quiet as everyone considered the implications.

The doctor was serious. The lines that carved into his cheeks and neck never faltered. No mocking. He believed it might be a solution.

“What do I have to do?” Alex asked. He had doubts that needed to be pacified.

“Very little,” Tim continued. “For all intents and purposes you’ll sleep, allowing your consciousness to become Dougal’s. I’ll ask him questions, talk to him. I have no idea if it’ll work, but I do think it’s worth a try.” He threw a quick glance at Kate, who looked more nervous than Alex felt.

“Have ye done this before?”

“Yes. Different circumstances but with favorable results.”

Alex reached under the table to take Kate’s hand in his own. It felt cool and clammy. She squeezed her slender fingers into his, communicating approval. Their relationship was young, but he clearly understood her body language.

“Aye. I’ll do it.” A collective sigh of relief assured him the proposal was correct. But Alex wasn’t completely convinced. “I trust ye, doctor, that ye know what ye’re doing.”

Tim nodded. “Give me a few minutes to set up a camera and tape recorder. It could be beneficial.” With graceful movements he was setting a video camera on a tripod and checking that a tape recorder was functioning to his satisfaction. He beckoned for Alex to sit in the recliner. “Make yourself comfortable,” he waved to the chair, “and we’ll get started.”

\* \* \* \*

Alex took both Kate’s hands into his own and leaned to her shoulder. “Are ye sure ye want me to do this?” he whispered, so close he felt the heat of her skin against his cheek.

“Not really. But it couldn’t hurt. And like Tim says, it’s worth a try.”

“For ye, then.” Alex cupped her face with his hand and kissed her, lightly. If he was going to pass into some unknown world, for even the briefest of time, he wanted the taste of her on his lips. “I love ye, Ceitag,” he murmured. He just couldn’t express his devoted feelings often enough.

With one last squeeze of her hand, he let go and settled into the recliner.

Tim had pulled a straight-backed wooden chair to the side and took a deep breath. “Let your body relax, Alex,” he commanded gently. “Breathe deeply, close your eyes and let your mind go blank.”

Alex did as asked, and as his lids closed voluntarily, he took with him the picture of Kate, sitting anxiously beside her sister at the table.

“Relax,” Tim repeated over and over. His voice was dull, void of emotion.

“Sleep now. Let your mind drift. Concentrate only on my words. Sleep.”

At first Alex’s thoughts rebelled, faces from his past drifted through his mind’s eye and he was about to spring up and proclaim failure, but like a bubble in the breeze, the visions vanished and a wall of pale emptiness fell over him.

“Sleep.” The voice, now far away in some distant place, faded into nothingness.

*White light jolted his eye open. He was standing on a floor that didn’t exist. There were no walls surrounding him, no ceiling to shade him from the searing whiteness, and he was frozen, without cold or fear, simply paralyzed.*

*Someone was there with him. He saw a movement and without turning focused*

*the blurred edges of a face. A woman. Long auburn hair flowed over her shoulders, her long dress wrapped around her legs as she sat on the earth, waiting for him to join her. He moved now. Slowly, mechanically, but he moved, lifting limbs of lead to be by her side.*

*She laughed, welcomingly, holding her hand out to greet him, and when she took hold she felt soft, warm, and full of life. "I've been waitin' fer ye," she smiled, voice sweet, musical. "What took ye so long?"*

*He didn't recognize her, yet at the same time he knew everything about her--every curve, every promise, every thought. Love drenched his being with such ferocity he was certain his chest would explode.*

*Relief flooded over him. She was safe. He had not failed.*

*She pushed his hand against her stomach, swollen, hard. "The babe," she smiled. "He knows his da is near."*

*He tried to speak but couldn't utter a word. Not that it seemed to matter. She knew. "Listen," she said, tugging his ear to the ledge of her belly. "He speaks to ye."*

*Her dress was soft against the hardness beneath. Through both came a slight movement. She stroked his long hair to one side and leaned forward to kiss his temple. The lips were warm and passionate. This was a cloud; a white shimmering cloud and he refused to move in case it evaporated.*

*"Promise me something," she said. The words danced around him and slipped away again, echoing.*

*'I promise,' he answered wordlessly. 'Anything for my love.'*

*Fingers twirled his long locks. "When the bairn comes, if I should die..."*

*A mighty wrench and he was peering into the unflinching green eyes. Gentle, sad, yet full of hope.*

*"If," she repeated, a faint blush rising to her face. "Save me in the crypt. My wish is to be with ye, always. So when yer time comes we can be together."*

*It was a simple request, without fear, with inevitability.*

*"Promise?"*

*'I promise'.*

*The light around her flashed, a sudden explosion of sparkling white, and she was growing smaller, vanishing, and fear ripped his heart, tightening an icy grip of unfulfillment. Immobile, again, he struggled to rise to race towards her distancing form, but it evaporated so quickly he soon lost sight of her.*

*"Katrina!" he screamed, his mouth cotton, the name soundless.*

*She was gone.*

*And his promise, empty fleeting words, had not been honored.*

*He shielded his face from a sudden blast of heat. Popping noises around him mingled with the stench of smoke. Fire. It danced everywhere and his shoulder stiffened at the sharp sting of injury. Panic drove him on. He would not be defeated.*

*"Katrina!" he screamed but the black smoke choked off his call.*

*She was gone. He saw, through the haze of nearing death, her tear-stained face. His fingers wrapped his torn throat in vain. Nothing would stop his life from draining into the earth.*

*Cursed. No love within these walls now. Nor would there be until he found her again. That darkness would survive here until his anger ceased, until his promise*



*fulfilled, until she was in his arms ... united within eternity. Cursed.*

*He fell. Breathed no more. Death's dark cloak had spread over his body. He could fight no more.*

Alex's first sense of reality was the sweet scent of heather tickling his nose, then an ache in his forehead. Before opening heavy lids his hand was automatically reaching for the dull pain, to sooth the throb with stiff fingertips. Struggling to rise and grip onto the surroundings, he heard his name from above and behind.

"Alex?" It was Kate. She was peering down at him and when he threw his questioning glance at her, she fell to his side.

"What happened?" he asked numbly. His palm was wet and splotched with dirt. He was sitting on something extremely hard and uncomfortable.

Alex lifted his hand to shadow his eyes from the bright sunlight. Tim and Mally were there, watching and waiting.

He felt as though his brain was filled with dense cobwebs and he couldn't pull free. "Where am I?" he muttered. "What happened?"

Kate held his arm, her fingers trembled, and he followed her gaze to the earth where he sat. There, nearly hidden amongst a tangle of weeds and heather, was a rectangular slab of stone. Lettering, despite the ravages of time and elements of nature, was etched over it, curved and dulled with lichen and erosion. But enough was left to jerk Alex into the shock of total consciousness.

*Dougal MacTamhais. Warrior Chief. Non Oblitus. 1602.*

Alex was sitting on a tomb he had no idea existed.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Alex's fingers trembled spastically. So much so that Kate kept her hand around his even after he took the glass of whiskey. After two long swallows he calmed, but only slightly. His eyes closed, he dug the heel of the other hand into his cheekbones, but not even this could bring back any color behind the pale skin. He muttered something in Gaelic before slowly opening his lids and focused, dazedly towards Kate.

She heard the rustle of excited movement and whispers as Mally and Tim reviewed the whole incident, caught forever on videotape. She had seen it all once, watched Alex with horrified amazement, as he had fallen into a deep, semi-conscious sleep and reemerged as another man. Even his face seemed to change, the jaw sagging, the round lips thinning to form heavily accented words. And when the unfamiliar eyes had opened she had shuddered because they rolled to her in recognition and the mind behind them was not Alex's. There was too much torment within the glazed expression, yet the stranger searched for her. He spoke of loss, failure, a promise that had to be filled and a fear that his true love had finally forgotten him. She had watched as the possession grew, lifting Alex's body to mechanically wander from the house, through the garden and finally to collapse on the tomb. Then it was over. Alex came back to her.

But the agony in the voice had shaken her. It echoed such desolation she had felt her own heart would crack in response. And despite the vacancy uttered from another man's tortured soul, there was a frightening element of Alex within its deep expression. Like a bolt shattering the scene around her, Kate knew she was incapable of dooming their love to the same isolation and failure: she would never part with him. Never.

Kate stroked Alex's cheek, tucking the blanket around his middle as he twisted to find comfort on the couch. "How are you feeling?" she asked warily. Still pale and limp, she knew the answer but wanted to hear his voice again, reaffirm the other man was gone.

He smiled weakly and finished the drink, handing her the glass before slumping into the pillow. "I have a smashing headache," he whispered, wincing as he spoke, confirming that the slightest vibration was torturous.

Alex folded his fingers around her wrist and closed his eyes again. "I'm no doing that again," he said quietly. "Tell them."

"You won't have to," Kate assured. "I'm certain that they got all the answers they needed."

Alex nodded, tenderly placing his forehead on her shoulder as though it would shatter with mere contact. The fingers round her waist tightened. Without opening his eyes he whispered, "Marry me, Ceitag."

Kate perched precariously on the edge of the couch holding him as assuring as her strength would permit. His palm inched up the nape of her neck and softly tugged her hair. Like butterfly wings his lips fluttered to her ear. "To say that I love ye is no enough. I canna put to words how much I want ye. And need ye."

She felt him swallow as though nervous but the beating within his chest was steady, and strong and true. "Yes," she whispered, her own throat so dry the word

croaked.

He flinched, grasping her shoulders. "What did ye say?"

Kate lifted her head from his chest and peered into disbelieving, fluid pools that shimmered with hope. "Yes, I will marry you."

Except for a sudden intake of air Alex's body had solidified.

"Yes," she repeated. "Yes."

She hadn't realized that his whole frame was steel until the release of air from exploding lungs weakened every muscle. A flicker of arousal washed through her stomach as the expression instantly reminded her of their lovemaking; the face, contorted as though in pain, would relax violently in the ecstasy of release, just as it had done now, and she felt her own body weaken at the very sight.

"Oh, Ceitag," he sighed, clutching her into his chest with a new power surging through each arm.

The relief was too much and Kate was shocked to find that he collapsed into tears, emotionally drained. Burying his face into the curve of her collarbone, she tried to calm him now, brushing her fingers through his mane of black hair and gently rocking his shuddering shoulders. His fingertips dug into her back, clinging to her for life, and bathing her skin with a flood of heat. She was shocked and embarrassed, quickly glancing to the others to beg patience and a few moments of privacy. They were smiling knowingly and already inching towards the door.

Kate squeezed him as tightly as she could, his wet cheek against her breast. As though drunk, muddled words flowed fast and furiously into her cleavage, half of which she barely understood. Through it all he confirmed his devotion and a promise of euphoric happiness.

"Alex," she laughed, making a valiant attempt to hold the trembling at bay, "I know. Calm down."

"Nay, ye dinna know," he smiled up at her, his whole face glowed elation. "Ye have made me a very rich man."

Kate twisted her brow in confusion but continued to smile; his rapture was intoxicating. "What are you talking about?"

Alex sat straight up. "Ye'll want for nothing, Ceitag. I have the means to make sure of it." He paused as though she would put the pieces together, but she shook her head, still ignorant to his meaning.

"Jimmy," he grinned. "Jimmy left me his estate. Not the house, I mean, his money. During the war he made a sly fortune in the black market. And o'er the years he spent very little. In the end he wanted me to have it all, except the portion of the house for you and your sister. But the money meant nothing to me because ... because I was so empty inside and had no one to share it with." Heat from his palms flooded Kate's cheeks. "Now I have ye and your love has made me a truly rich man."

Despite Alex's obvious elation Kate felt wounded. She drew away from him, watching his brow lift to her questioning stare. "Are you telling me that you were keeping the money a secret because you didn't trust me? That maybe I was a gold digger?"

Alex ignored her solemn trepidation. "Aye," he answered seriously. "And I make no apology for it, either. Ceitag, I had to know ye loved *me*, regardless of my status."

“Appeased now, then, are you?” Kate’s chest tightened in annoyance.

“I am,” he announced, matter-of-factly. “In every sense o’ the word.”

Kate was refused permission to allude longer to any misgivings. Alex had her firmly sealed in his arms, a combination of tears and kisses continued to flood over her hair and face. His gestures of adoration were making her giddy and there was still the issue of ghostly inhabitants to mull over.

“Stop this!” she scolded finally. “I am not a giant teddy bear for you to maul to death!”

“I’ve only just begun,” he teased, a brilliant watery light glistening from each eye.

“Don’t you want to know what’s on Tim’s tape?”

Alex shook his head, a lock twisting over his forehead. “I could care less.”

“Don’t tell him that. What happened was very frightening, Alex. We’ve come this far. Don’t you think we owe it to ... them ... to finish this if we can? Then we will be free to carry on with our own lives.”

Alex’s smile loosened. “Aye,” he said with renewed seriousness. “You’re right. I dinna want either of them getting jealous and trying to meddle.”

Kate was about to question about the two ghosts’ ability to effectively interfere when Mally gently rapped on the doorframe. “Sorry,” she said. “But there’s a gentleman here to see Alex.”

If their commitment to each other was to be private, Kate realized the idea fruitless. She abandoned thoughts of secrecy and smiled confirmation to which her sister, grinning like a Cheshire cat, bounded away; Tim no doubt was the intended goal.

Alex wavered slightly as he stood, reaching for balance. The headache of hypnotism and euphoria culminated in his skull. He blinked a few times and said without showing discomfort, “Dinna go away, Ceitag. I’ll be right back.”

She followed him as far as the door, holding his hand, affirming her affection by touching him as much as possible. But she waited here, waving at the visitor who turned out to be Doug, leaning against his car, arms folded with an air of disapproval. And as she watched Alex’s broad shoulders flex as he strode across the courtyard, she wondered if he would tell his brother about their plans for marriage. Doug would no doubt be overjoyed his little brother was about to finally settle. Maybe the news would lighten his anxious expression.

Kate stepped behind the open door to listen. Not so far away and with the voices carried on the wind, she could hear virtually every word.

“Aye, Dougie, ye look worried man. Somethin’ wrong?”

Kate heard the older man cough harshly before beginning. “I dinna know, laddie, but I thought it were best if I told ye and then ye could decide yerself.” His hard jaw was set. This was no pleasant social call.

“Weel, out with it then.”

Kate suppressed a giggle. Between the glee of securing her future with the man she loved, and the natural thicker accent he used with his brother, she felt a giddiness rise in her heart.

Doug went on. “There’s a rather nasty lookin’ bugger about the village, askin’ a lot of questions about ye.”

“About me?” Alex sounded incensed. “What sort of questions?”

“Where ye lived. If ye had a woman. He even asked if ye were a man o’ money.”

There was a pause and then Alex's voice seemed agitated. "How do ye know all this?"

"I saw 'im myself in The Boar's Head. He was chatting up the wee lass that works there, Melanie."

"Melanie?" Alex repeated, fearfully.

"Aye, and seems she's well and truly pissed off at ye. She was feeding him answers to e'ery question and I dinna like the tone to her voice. Break another heart, did ye?"

Alex mumbled Gaelic, followed by, "When did all this happen?"

"Last night. I tried to throw him off a bit," Doug continued. "Told him to take a hike and stop bothering the lass, but I dinna think he listened, truth be told. There's revenge in that man's eyes, Alex, and I figured ye should know."

"What does he look like?" Alex asked.

"He's big. Hair is cut verra short, wee beady eyes, and a permanent sneer. Och, aye, and a nasty tattoo on his neck."

"Let me guess--a rattlesnake."

"Aye. That's right. Ye do know him then?"

"Holy Mary," Alex exclaimed, making Kate's heart thump nervously despite not understanding why. "Doug, does he know ye are my brother?"

"I expect so. Melanie was hangin' off him like a dirty nappy and she well knows who I am."

Alex stiffened, his shoulders rose like a small wave. "Where air yer lasses, Doug?"

The question hit the older man with a thud. He stared relentlessly into Alex while he thought. "Home, as far as I know. Sarah might be in the stables. Why?"

Urgency oozed from Alex's voice. "Listen. I canna explain right now, but I will. Just go back home and keep the girls in the house till I call ye. Promise me, Doug. This bastard's a nasty piece o' work. It's me he wants but I'm certain he'll ... just keep the girls home, okay?"

"This is o'er a woman I wouldna doubt, knowing ye," Doug's voice reeked aggravation, to say nothing of disgust.

"Aye," came the answer. "But no what ye think."

There was another hard pause. The two men were standing perfectly still, and Doug's face had twisted and flushed with frustrated temper. "Damn ye, Alex. Damn ye all to Hell."

Alex put his hand on his brother's shoulder. "Not yet, brother. Not if I can help it."

Doug had started for his car, turned suddenly and waltzed back to Alex, his face purple with rage. "If my lasses are in any kind of bother because of ye," he jabbed his pudgy forefinger fiercely into his brother's chest, "and yer inability to keep that," he glanced at Alex's groin, "in yer trousers, ye'll have more than just a thug to deal with."

Alex bowed his head in apology and defeat as Doug ripped his car into gear and tore from the yard. As soon as the small vehicle disappeared down the road, Alex started for the stables. Thinking twice, he spun on one heel and trotted to the doorway where Kate still stood, hand clamped over her mouth to keep her own uneasiness contained.

"Did ye hear all that?" Alex asked. If he was annoyed about her listening he kept

it hidden.

“Most of it,” Kate answered, “but I don’t understand.”

Alex’s usually ruddy complexion was drained and his eyes were like saucers. Yet when he clamped his huge hands softly around her neck there was a ripple of authority and control in the action that soothed her temporarily. “Listen, Ceitag. Do exactly what I tell ye now. It’s verra important ye follow my instructions.”

She nodded, watched the never blinking wideness of his dark eyes. She thought perhaps there was a vast bottomless fear behind each.

“Stay inside. Tell the others to do the same. Dinna open the door to anyone until I get back. Do ye understand?”

“No. Where are you going? Why are you so upset? What’s...?”

He shook her shoulders gently. “My past, Ceitag. Now it’s my turn to have the past haunt me.” There was a short pause as he peered longingly into her face. He wanted her to hear more than just a few words, and she had, the shudder sweeping needles down her spine.

“But...”

“I will no be long. Go in the house and do as I ask ye and ye’ll be fine. I promise.”

“But...”

“Ceitag! Please, dinna argue. I’ll explain when I get back.”

Begrudgingly, she concurred. Alex managed a quick grin and his expression softened. If this were meant to calm her it didn’t work. Still, if anyone knew how to handle this mysterious crisis, she was confident he could.

“Just don’t be long.”

His kiss was hard; not only taking her breath momentarily but also the force jugged her backwards. He followed, clinging to the kiss while cleverly maneuvering her to the foyer. As she stumbled on the step he withdrew and whispered, “I love ye so much.” He gave a worried sigh. “Stay here. I will no be long.”

He ran across the courtyard and threw open the stable doors to release the car. Within minutes it was ready, and Alex slammed the doors behind, locking them securely. Without ceremony he was gone and Kate stood, arms crossed around her middle, and choked back a vile taste that had welled up in her throat.

\* \* \* \*

Tim and Mally were pouring over the video. He was furiously scratching notes as Mally pointed at the shimmering screen, nodding and mumbling agreement to some clever revelation that Kate no longer had patience to hear.

“Alex has asked us to stay here until he gets back,” she said with as little expression as she could muster. “Seems there’s some trouble and...”

She didn’t know how to explain. If she wasn’t certain herself what was going on how could she convince the others of her premonition of impending doom?

Mally left Tim’s side, as he returned his attention to the screen. “Are you all right?” she whispered. “You look terrible.”

Kate laughed nervously. “Oh, I can’t imagine why. Haunted houses, a possessed man, my little sister running off with a...” She lowered her voice, “A man twice her age, and now my intended has gone to take care of some thug who’s been asking a lot of questions about him. Why should I look bad?”

Mally stared at her without humor. "I'm not running off and he's not twice my age and what are you babbling about?"

"I'm sorry," Kate moaned. Her whole chest was tightening with waves of anxiety. "Look, would you mind if I curled up on your bed for a few minutes. I feel incredibly wasted."

Mally put her arm around Kate's waist. "Are you going to marry him?" she smiled. "Did you finally say yes?"

The sudden warmth reminded Kate of the love surging within her heart and then it was instantly replaced with the fear that something terrible was about to happen. "If I ever see him again," she said, shocked by the despondency in her tone.

Mally's brow curved in confusion. "You better lie down awhile."

"Don't answer the door. Someone is looking for Alex and he doesn't want us to get caught up in the middle."

"Okay. Whatever." Mally was directing her to the bedroom. "I'll shut the door so we won't disturb you."

Kate fell to the pillow. Emotional fatigue had taken its toll. Her mind numbing in sleep, her last thought was of a faceless evil barring passage through a hole under the stairwell, and an angelic presence imprisoned within, pleading to be free.

\* \* \* \*

A thump followed quickly by another stirred Kate from a troubled dream. Although she instantly lost the image that had caused the restlessness, the feeling lingered, like the dull ache of a bruise. The next knock of something solid against the downstairs wall jolted her straight from the bed.

"Alex?" she called softly, not expecting to be heard, not wanting to. Jangled nerves were screaming danger and she took a few moments to collect her courage.

Mally, maybe, or Tim. It had to be. She had asked them to stay inside until Alex got back. Alex. Her mind was whirling back into reality. Doug, frustrated and angry, had warned Alex. *If my lasses are in any kind of trouble because of ye.... Trouble. My past has come back to haunt me ... don't answer the door.*

Kate clutched the quilt under her chin and waited for the sound of familiar voices. But none came. The noise had stopped and in the silence she slipped her feet gently to the floor. A board creaked beneath the weight of one step. Holding her breath she waited. The whole house was deathly quiet, and except for the thrashing of blood in her ears Kate heard nothing.

Holding the banister she cocked one ear to listen for signs of inhabitation in the living room below. Nothing. She breathed easier now. Unsettled at being alone, it was, at the same time, a relief. Visions of imperishable doom manifesting into twisted evil faces were vanishing. And with it Kate scolded herself for letting her nerves play tricks on her mind.

"Mally," she called firmly. "Are you there?" This time her voice was clear and strong, resonating into the foyer. And when there was no reply, Kate confidently stomped down the stairs and into the kitchen to make coffee.

As she turned at the bottom of the steps, the hairs on the back of her neck fluttered on end as a blast of icy air screamed through her flesh. A shadow blurred into her peripheral vision but before she had time to react, a hand, spongy and thick, had clamped viciously over her mouth. It smelled of kerosene and tobacco, and the combination

seeped into her taste buds, causing her stomach to flip in a sudden wrench of nausea.

Kate tried to throw out her arms in reflexive protection but one was caught and twisted behind her, the pain so severe across her shoulder she automatically crouched and the weight behind eased her to the floor. Then both wrists were being bound together. She gulped for breath, stunned at the violence and blinded with the fear of the unknown.

She had been too startled to do anything but squeak. Not that it mattered. A cloth was being pulled into her mouth anyway, tied securely behind her head. A boot, firmly planted between her shoulder blades, pushed her forward onto the floor and she fell with a crunching thud, making the whole room spin despite ending up lying quietly on the braided mat.

Taking air coarsely through her nose, Kate concentrated on anger rather than fear. Rolling awkwardly to her side she threw her narrowed eyes to the attacker who stood peering down at her, smirking maliciously. A tattoo of a coiled snake flicking its thin red tongue between exaggerated fangs shivered with a steady heartbeat beneath the painted skin.

Drunk with power, his lips curled into a sneer of satisfaction. Lecherous green eyes swept over her body, pausing on her heaving chest. One knee snapped loudly as he bent to run dirty fingers over the pulsating curve of her breast. Kate shuddered, expecting the rip of her blouse to follow and the inevitable force of rape. Neither materialized. Instead he laughed, a puff of foul breath twisting her stomach again. He wanted her to be afraid; he was feeding on it and it was giving him sadistic pleasure.

Kate ached to scream but the cloth was soaking up even the smallest of noises from her throat, to say nothing of every drop of saliva. She couldn't even swallow.

Sturdy arms yanked her up so that she could, at least, sit on the couch. He glanced anxiously out the window before lighting a cigarette and perching near by on a chair. Kate didn't want to look at him but horrified fascination dictated she do so.

"Be in yer best interests to answer my questions truthfully," he growled. Inhaling smoke deeply he continued. "Yer his woman."

This was no question but Kate nodded agreement anyway. She knew this was Owen MacGregor, that he was capable of unspeakable acts of depravity. Even if Alex hadn't told her what he looked like, she would have immediately recognized him by the cold calculating madness in his eyes, slanted spheres of inhumanity. The last thing she wanted was to be the next hapless victim. Yet she wondered if she had much choice.

He ran his tongue under his top lip, making a suggestive gurgling sound deep within his throat. "Good," he shouted. "When lover lad returns he can watch me take ye."

'As if,' Kate would scream if she could. She threw him a cold stare she hoped would convey her belief that he wasn't man enough to take Alex on. And if her hands were freed he would have a battle and a half to get near her. But that wasn't how his kind operated. His opponent would have to be weakened, otherwise he would cower and run.

"It's only fair. Ye see, he spent a great deal of time with my wife, and they were no playing cards. And then I come home to find her packin', sayin' she'd be leavin' me and ye know why? I'll tell ye, shall I? Because the whore was pregnant by him." His brow curled in feigned sadness. "A man canna get away with doin' such a thing to another man's wife, ye know."

Owen glanced at the cigarette a moment before continuing his speech. "Had



naught else to think about, all those years in prison, except what I would finally do to Alexander MacTavish when I found him. Ah,” his voice softened as though these were all treasured memories. “Kept me goin’ it did, aye. Suppose I shall be thankin’ him, that is, before ye both meet untimely deaths in the accidental fire.”

Kate felt her forehead lift to renewed panic. Fire. His hands smelled of kerosene. She twisted her wrists in an attempt to wiggle free but the act was useless. Her captor smiled with glee, watching her struggle.

“Shame ye had to be involved, but that’s the way it goes sometimes, no? I’ll make certain ye have one last wee piece of heaven before ye burn.” He rubbed his crotch and winked at her.

Kate closed her eyes, squeezing a tear onto her cheek. She regretted showing the weakness, but every thought was scrambled, and attempts to focus concentration shattered internal words into a thousand tiny unrecognizable pieces. Beyond panic, she struggled to regain control of the one whirling thought of flames lapping mercilessly over her bound body. She felt faint, as though spiraling deeper into a black hole after the pulling of a giant plug.

No peace even within this imaginary vortex, he was tugging her to stand. “Yer comin’ with me for now. I have work to finish. Into the pit with ye.”

He was pushing her towards the priest hole. Blinking several times to clear the haze of confusion and the blur of tears, Kate pressed her weight backwards, away from the black entrance. It was yawning out to her in an odd sigh of finality, and she had the most horrible sensation of falling, without end, into its bottomless fiery depths.

“No,” she choked, muffled through the wet material clogging her mouth.

Her legs hadn’t been tied. She had some mobility if she could only clear her muddled mind from the paralyzing fear of fire. Concentrating on keeping her balance, she hoped to bring her foot up to catch this monster in a tender place and then run as quickly as possible out and door and keep going, just keep going until a passing car stopped to help. Her heart racing with the prospect of rescue and freedom, she spun round to execute her plan, but he knew. He grasped her leg as it lifted and with a wry smile chastised her attempt with the slow waving of his nicotine yellowed forefinger in her face.

Slowly his teeth ground together and a purple flush of rage swelled his size. She watched helplessly as he judiciously gathered strength, muscle rippling through expanded lungs, through his flexing shoulder, down shivering biceps and into the back of his hand, which rose slow motion to one side and then connected, with a sickening crack, into her cheekbone. The strike was so severe that it sent her tumbling backwards down the damp stone steps, her bruised cheek smashing into a muddy puddle of cold water at the bottom.

Kate was dully aware that a searing pain ripped through the muscle all down her one side. Then the darkness, and oblivion, enveloped her with nothingness.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*"Ceitag. Wake now."*

*Kate's initial instinct was to reach for the throbbing muscle across her shoulders. But she couldn't move. The flesh on her wrists was torn, and a warm trickle oozed over her arm. Why could she not move? Twisting slightly the cord wrenched her mind into what she thought was reality. Eyes still closed she could see the snake, the dirty hands, the hideous grin--the monster from the darkness intent on murder because he had escaped the hole, motivated by revenge. The evil had a face.*

*"Ceitag."*

*All she wanted was to see Alex once more, be soothed in his arms and feel the eternal love that warmed her to the core. She had never been loved so powerfully, nor had she been so deeply in love with anyone. The cold against her cheek reminded her of the warmth within and as she concentrated on Alex's voice, his touch, the feel of his strong body on hers, she knew, that if she were to die, she at least had love once, embraced it, treasured it, and was once stronger because of it. Let the darkness take her. She knew the light within her heart would keep her free.*

*"Ceitag."*

*Kate forced her lids to crack open. She searched for the voice without moving; it was far too painful to move, to grant permission for the aching muscle to pull and relax with a stretch. But her mind demanded to know the source of the voice, and she conquered the pain a few short seconds so she could turn her head, ever so slightly, and peer through the shadows towards the gentleness beyond.*

*"Daughter. Air ye awake now?"*

*Kate neither flinched nor screamed nor questioned. The woman, sitting up on her earthen bed, smiling down at her, seemed the most natural sight within the blackness. A white light surrounded her, like an angel, shrouded in a veil of beauty and eternity, and the small crypt was awash with brilliance. This was death, Kate thought, the angel of death had come for her.*

*Ankles crossed, hands folded on her lap, the long dress shimmered in an unknown breeze. Fragile shoulders gently rose and fell with her breath, the rounded breast beneath the bodice promised a beating heart. Silk curls shivered over her neck and framed her face, wide piercing eyes, a rosebud mouth that curled into a sympathetic smile. Kate could almost feel heat radiating from the apparition.*

*Apparition. It had to be. A kernel of logic buried deep in Kate's whirling brain said she was hallucinating, that systems were shutting down and this was imagination gone wild in one final scream for existence. Before death. And Kate was certain of that now. Except for the woman who didn't seem to want to let go.*

*"Air ye afraid?" it asked, the words like soft music, floating through the stale air with freshness only hope could offer.*

*"Yes," Kate answered. She was sitting now, wrists free, gag dissolved. Her clothes were straight and clean, her hair brushed. And she looked up at the white woman*

*who never moved but at the same time seemed to be everywhere.*

*"I understand. I, too, have been afraid fer a long, long time. I am alone in this place, waitin' for my heart to find me. He will come soon, but ye, Ceitag, ye have found yer love; he has found ye. Dinna be afraid."*

*"Where have they gone?" Kate asked. "Why aren't they here?" In this mystical exchange of all knowing, 'they' were the same men, Dougal and Alex, Alex and Dougal.*

*Her smile slowly faded and the wide unblinking eyes rolled from side to side. "Because, dear child, where there is love so, too, must there be hate. If he is to find us, the hate must die." She bowed her head, long curls jerked sporadically. "But it is verra strong now, having grown unchallenged fer so many, many years. They have gone to find courage, from each other." Her chin tipped up, teardrops etching tiny streams over cracked, pale skin. Bony fingers clutched at the curve of her breast, releasing an oval locket from the protective valley of her cleavage.*

*The aura of light around her rippled with the motion of lifting arms as she reached for the clasp behind her neck. With a gentle tug the locket fell free into her palm.*

*"He loves ye so much," the now purple lips cried with growing emotion. "I can feel his passion even here, in this prison. I know this to be true because I once had that joy. I have ne'er forgotten. Tell him I have no forgotten. Ye will help us now, Ceitag. Ye must help us. Please."*

*Flesh was melting from her bones; the once glistening eyes were gone. The sunken sockets of a white skull were all that remained. The blush of tear-stained cheeks flowed red and then vanished to bone; the lips curled in agony as her fingers thrust against her stomach. The gown oozed sticky blood, seeping into the sea of material over her abdomen, and with a piercing screech the knife twisted, shredding flesh, and cloth. White bone crumbled back into its deathly bed as one word resonated throughout the cavern. "Dougal!"*

*Then she was gone.*

*And Kate, wrenching at the cloth in her mouth and the smell of kerosene, wept.*

*\* \* \* \**

*"On yer feet, bitch," snapped a rough command from above. A hand snatched her bruised shoulder, and she staggered to her feet as quickly as she could to keep the pain from spreading. "It's show time."*

*The only illumination beneath her feet came from the flashlight behind. Kate made her way to the stone steps. The slosh of liquid in a heavy container forced her captor to wheeze as he pushed her and carried it up towards the foyer. A blast of gas-drenched air blew into her nose as she stepped into the stone hallway. Everything was drenched, waiting for the execution by fire.*

*She heard the sound of wheels crunching stone outside, and her heart raced in a wordless prayer of rescue. Was it Alex? Or Mally and Tim returning from whatever urgency took them away in the first place?*

*Pushed forward she slumped to her knees next to the gentle tick-tick of the grandfather clock. Within the next instant her clothes were soaked with an oily, sticky shower. The last container had been saved for her. One spark and she would burst into a fireball, which was obviously the intent. Kate desperately tried to subdue her rolling stomach.*

*Senses acute, she heard him slither to the door and peek out the small crack of*

light. Kate saw what he saw; it was Alex's shadow, which faltered beyond the tiny opening of the door and faded.

"Please," she whispered internally. "Put it all together."

Owen stood cocked and primed, gripping a crowbar with white knuckle. His yellow fingers flexed up and around the bar, and he shifted his weight in growing expectancy, rocking back and forth, as though wanting to secure the best angle for his attack.

But the door did not open. The shadow outside had evaporated completely and all was quiet.

Kate wondered if she were hallucinating again.

It seemed eternity, kneeling there, the oil seeping into her flesh, every muscle straining, her mind numbing to the inevitable whoosh of searing fire. She had given up hope of rescue, her blurred vision watching the man above her who clutched the crowbar as though he were a batter in a summer baseball game. But the pitcher wasn't co-operating. The ball hadn't been thrown and still he waited. Any minute now. Any minute.

Kate heard the faint clank of steel against stone, turning in its direction only when she saw a mortified expression flash across her captor's face. The muscles in her neck pulled as she slowly turned to find Alex, filling the whole hallway with his presence; he had snuck round to the back door and was poised, the tip of Dougal's sword tapping gently on the stone for attention.

The sword twisted in the air as Alex lifted it threateningly towards Owen from across the hallway. The crowbar seemed no match but as Owen recovered from the shock of being dubbed, he smirked, allowing the bar to drop. It clanked twice before resting beside Kate's wilted figure.

"Aye, weel, ye're too clever fer the likes of me, Alexander MacTavish," Owen said as though giving up and without any trace of agitation. He casually sat on the one step near Kate and smiled as Alex took a cautious step forward.

"Let her go," Alex demanded. "This is between ye and me."

Owen laughed, dry, cracked, and harsh. "Aye, unfinished business. But the wee lass is between us. Take care, MacTavish."

"What do ye want?" Alex spit. Kate could see his face from where she crouched, his curled lip and frozen features as he snarled.

"I would have thought that obvious, no." Owen reached his arm around her waist, holding it there while continuing, "If memory serves me right ye took my wife, MacTavish, on more than one occasion. So, I think it would only be fair that I have a wee bit of fun with yers."

"Ye've had all the fun ye're gonna get." Alex took another step closer, the sword ahead, leading the way.

Owen tipped his head to one side, an expression of mock surprise. "That right?" he grinned. "Who's gonna stop me? Ye, MacTavish? I dinna think so."

Kate could see Alex's broad shoulders shiver with a growing rage. 'No,' she thought, 'Alex, don't let him chide you. Don't fall for his tricks. He'll blind you with rage.' She dared not utter a sound. To do so might distract him, giving Owen the opportunity to attack.

"Nay a second time, Owen," Alex muttered through clenched teeth. "Yer days of

thrashing women are o'er."

Owen laughed again. Even without looking Kate could tell the man was composed, his breath steady, voice without anxiety. He showed little emotion except perverse enjoyment. "Dinna come closer," he said. The arm around her tightened, causing her to flinch.

Alex swept steady eyes from Owen to her and then back again. He lowered the sword's tip and stood quietly, nostrils flaring. The severity of the situation was working its way into deep lines down his face and neck.

"Och, ye noticed then," Owen continued, catching the change on Alex's face. "Does smell bad in here, aye?" He casually reached into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out a cigarette.

Kate stiffened, her internal organs all but shut down.

"Dinna do this," Alex whispered. "We can come to some arrangement."

A lighter, square and shiny, flitted menacingly between his oil stained fingers. "Put it down," he said, glancing to the sword. "And back away."

Alex hesitated a moment and then did as asked. Soundlessly the sword was placed on the floor and he took one step back, palms upright in submission.

"That's better now is it, no? All friends here." The fingers dug into her waist, betraying a slight agitation. The snake twisted as Owen turned to look at Kate. "What's she like, then?" he smirked. "Looks all soft and tender. I could have some pleasure o' her yet, despite the smell." He leaned to her shoulder and sniffed, a gesture she was certain was to let Alex know she had been bathed in kerosene.

She managed to swallow a ball of fear, not for herself now, but Alex. She could sense his helplessness. It hung in the air almost as heavy as the smell of fuel.

"Ye ready to go back to prison, are ye?" Alex said, grasping at straws. "Do ye really think it worth it? Ye already with a record?"

Owen croaked another laugh. "Aye, if they catch me, which they won't. By the time yer charred remains are found, I'll be half way to France."

"Nay, Owen. I will no let ye do this." Alex's voice was eerily cool, but Kate knew he was worried. Beads of sweat had formed across his forehead.

The lighter clanked to life. A small yellow flame flickered erect, wavering silently within one man's power. He slowly lit the cigarette and shut the flame away. Torture, Kate thought. He's going to torture us first. A slight whimper erupted somewhere deep within her throat. She rolled frightened eyes to Alex. His face was white with fear; the only movement was a nerve shuddering beneath one eye.

"Ye hurt her," Alex growled, "and yer a dead man."

"I ne'er give a woman what she does no deserve." Kate's flesh crawled as he stroked her back, the hand becoming too familiar with the curve of her shoulder, tickling her skin beneath the shirt's damp collar. With a mighty rip the blouse tore, the buttons springing out like tiny missiles. "And this one deserves a good thrashing fer bein' with the likes of ye."

Alex jerked forward and as he did Owen held out the cigarette, threatening instant fire.

Everyone froze again; nothing moved as time seemed to stop.

The air was heavy with nerves and Kate felt faint, unable to breath, the gag choking her need to scream frustration. Locking eyes with Alex, she quietly pleaded for

him to turn and go, even though she knew such an act would never cross his mind. He wouldn't desert her. Nor would he let this creature molest her, but the only option was a fireball, with her in the middle. If only he would save himself.

"I have money," Alex confessed, trying to divert attention. Owen's hand was inching across her breast, pausing only at the word 'money'.

"I know," he said. "Vicky told me the old man was well off."

Alex shuddered visibly at the name, his dark eyes clouded with renewed fury. The memory of her and the unborn child widened his eyes and caused his face, now already pale, to whiten further.

He crouched on the floor beside the sword, his fingers not far from the shining pommel. Kate braced herself. The body beside her tensed while the cigarette hung menacingly between his fingers.

"If ye kill us ye'll ne'er see a penny." Alex trembled slightly.

"Och, weel," Owen smirked. "My loss. Price I'll pay for my fun." Stubby fingertips dug into the hardened curve of her breast. "Now I think ye should back away while I have a look at what ye've been enjoying of late. I had to share with ye. Least ye can do is return the favor."

"Nay!" Alex shouted, so loudly both Kate and her captor startled. He had lunged for the sword, gripping it fiercely. "Face me, ye coward. Or does frightening a woman make ye feel more like a man?" Standing an inch at a time, his lips curled in a snarl. "Or do ye simply get off by watching them die? Ye killed Vicky. I'm no about to stand by and watch ye kill another."

The hand that had intruded into her flesh jerked away and with the thrust she slid gratefully sideways, as far from the red glow of the now near finished cigarette as she could. Recoiling from the raised hand, he held the butt as though preparing to flick it at her, but was distracted by the sudden shriek of laughter accompanying approaching footsteps outside. Mally! She and Tim had come back, and for the first time Owen's face twisted in confusion. Company he obviously hadn't expected.

Picking up the crowbar, Owen took a few steps back behind the door. Kate sighed. At least it took him and the cigarette farther from her. When the door flung open, Mally came in first, clutching a package of photographs in her hand. She first saw Alex, poised with the sword, and then gaped at Kate, cowering helplessly on the stone step.

"What on earth?" she began, the seriousness of the situation etching slowly across her face. Her mortified expression wasn't caught by Tim soon enough. He was in the door and in full view before seizing the opportunity to remain anonymous.

For a few moments no one spoke. The spell was broken only by Mally crouching defensively next to her sister, ripping the gag away, while Tim inched along the wall, instinctively shielding both women as best he could. He was peering between Alex and the stranger, quickly connecting deadly dots.

Owen was slowly sidestepping towards one container that sat, lid unscrewed, near the priest hole. In order to do so he had to get closer to Alex, who continued to glare, twisting the sword from side to side. "Give it up," Alex whispered. "There's no way ye can get off now."

Logic. Reality. But both were fading. Nothing in the drumming silence made sense and Kate had no time to think.

Owen smirked. "Think so?" And with that he flicked the butt with expert

precision into the tin container.

With a whoosh came pandemonium. The container spun with the soft explosion, spreading liquid flames in its wake, which immediately searched for every possible consumable area. Pools of kerosene exploded into miniature yellow balls and the fire's greedy tongue quickly lapped up the walls and across the floor. Fingers sped simultaneously creating a barrier, eager to begin the awaited destruction.

Alex was too close to the sudden heat, and automatically lifted his hand to shield his face and in so doing lost his grip on the sword.

Mally screamed first. Kate tried but her mouth was too dry. Within seconds Tim was wrenching both her and Mally to the clear air beyond the door. But something made her freeze in the doorway, only steps from freedom, and look back. Through the wall of shivering flames, she saw Alex search for the enemy and once found, race forward to grab hold of the stocky figure that was trying to slither escape into the hole beneath the stairs.

Grapping the fleeing offender by the scruff of his neck, Alex forced him to the floor with a crunching blow to the head. Owen recovered quickly, rolled dangerously close to one line of flame, stopping just out of reach, and was on his feet again. Facing Alex, he crouched and the two men dove into each other, fists flying. Kate squinted through the continually dancing flames to get a better view, her own panic on hold, replaced with mesmerizing confidence Alex would subdue the threat within seconds.

Yet the flames, too, seemed to take on their own persona. One gush had flooded with frightening speed up one of the heavy tapestries, lapping ferociously around the grandfather clock. Fed by an oily streak the fire took hold of a beam behind, which popped and crackled, splintering a section free. It jerked, tapping the clock, already unstable from flames curling over the base. Before Kate could collect words of warning, there was another pop, followed by a shower of sparks, which freed the sentinel from its position against the wall, tipping outward. Alex was directly in the path of its descent.

He turned to see the threat, but not soon enough. It clipped his right shoulder, throwing him off balance and to the floor like a discarded limp doll. His shirt smoldered, and Alex yelped at the sudden infliction of stinging burn.

Seizing the opportunity, Owen brought his boot up under Alex's jaw, and with a dazed grunt at the impact Alex fell backwards. Again the foot propelled, this time directly to his throat, landing with a horrible crunch to the windpipe. Kate heard a heavy wheeze for air through agonizing breaths.

The fire inched ever closer to where he lay on the concrete.

The flames parted and dipped, enough that Kate saw Alex roll mournful eyes at her as he clutched his throat, gasping for air. And above his head the dark crowbar was being lifted, readying itself to viciously inflict the final thud of a deathblow.

Kate screamed, although her voice, shrill and piercing, was not hers. She felt the vibration within her breast but the sound merged with another that streaked throughout the room, bouncing off each crackling wall.

*Katrina!*

The scene stopped, as though a photograph of the macabre. Nothing moved. Even the flames seemed to bow in eerie submission. But something did move and it was striding across the room from the dull light of the back doorway.

Alex crouched helplessly on the floor, writhing for air; he couldn't see the dark

figure that was confidently striding into the foyer, but Owen did. He looked up, eyes wide in utter disbelief, and focused solely on the barrel chest of a man dressed completely in highland regalia. Long black hair washed over the sash draped from the shoulder, the red plaid swished from side to side with each determined stride. His massive fingers spread, commanding the sword to defy gravity, to rise and melt into his palm. Gripping it tightly with both hands it instantly became part of his arm.

This time the figure had a face.

Despite the shimmering flames between them Kate saw what was an almost perfect picture of Alex's features. Except that the brow was screwed tightly in anger, the jaw slightly more square, they could have been identical.

Dougal, Alex; Alex, Dougal.

Owen backed away in absolute horror, the iron bar clanking to the floor from his lifeless hand.

Then, shimmering in the blackness of the priest hole, a woman appeared. Her flowing white dress shivered as she floated from the confines of the madness that had held her prisoner for centuries, and the warrior looked at her, the contortions of anger in his face immediately vanquished. She held out her hand to him, oblivious of the defeated evil that had once kept them separated. Sheer ecstasy filled their faces as they peered at each other.

Owen cowered against the wall, his thin lips stretched in a silent scream, inching away from the ghastly scene unfolding, to the only escape that presented itself to him-- the priest hole.

But there was no escape now. Absolution was too near, the chance for final peace too close. All barriers were now crumbling and the past was conquered, its torturous hold broken.

The warrior's face stiffened, the black eyes wide and fixed on Owen, who was desperately stumbling through the broken boards. The sash on his broad shoulder twisted as mighty arms lifted the sword high in the smoke-filled air. And every flame obeyed the silent command, bowing to their master and then fluttering with what sounded like a hundred triumphant tiny squeaks, streaking from every area of the room in a frantic race to the black opening beneath the stairs.

Flames culminated at the opening, wavering for merely a second, joining together in one final salute to the now all-powerful master. The sword lowered, the cue permitting the screaming heat to grow into one gigantic firewall, which engulfed the terrified intruder in a mass of sizzling flesh while simultaneously ripping the stairs from the foundation, spreading pieces of wood splintering in every direction.

Another scream, one that was deep, and harsh, terrified, and dying, faded from within the walls of the crypt.

The blast had thrown Alex towards the back door. He crawled awkwardly along the one step, his parched lips still gasping for air. The sound distracted Kate's attention from the now silent hole that yawned quietly from the depth beneath.

"Alex!" she called and raced across the blackened stone. It and the smell of smoke were the only remaining signs of fire.

"Alex." Beside him now, she threw her arms around his neck, and he crawled instinctively into them, his laborious breath slowly easing.

Tears of relief streamed down her cheeks as she cradled him into her chest and as



she stroked his shivering shoulders and flooded kisses into his hair; she gave a short prayer of thanks for the deliverance.

Mally was crouching next to her, blue eyes filled with tears, and Tim had moved cautiously to the gaping hole, peering through the last few wisps of black smoke funneling gently from the opening under the stairs.

The apparitions were gone.

So, too, was Owen MacGregor.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Mally helped Kate into the shower and waited, sitting on the upstairs bed, silently watching the sun begin its slow descent towards the moor. As soon as Kate had dressed in the fresh clothes Mally had put out for her, the two sisters joined the men, who were also sitting in silent meditation, a bottle of whiskey between them on the table.

Alex was staring blankly at his glass, and Tim, still pale and expressionless, was rubbing his fingers on the bridge of his nose. Without looking up Alex said, "Well, doctor, too bad we couldn't offer ye any proof of wee spirits." A wry smirk fluttered in the corner of his mouth.

Tim chuckled, squashing the short intake with a gulp of whiskey. He shook his head and sighed in disgust, "No one will believe me anyway. And I had shut the cameras off." Losing his professional demeanor, he then uttered a string of profanity under his breath.

Alex smiled and lifted his eyes to the spirit-weary professor. "Aye, ne'er mind. Ye know it to be true. Proof or no, this one will surely top yer list then."

"That it will, mate," he rumbled. "That it will."

Mally passed Kate a pack of ice to hold against her bruised cheek. She had ignored the dull throb in that side of her skull; she was too relieved that they had all managed to escape intact. Since entering the room, she hadn't taken her eyes from Alex. He smiled warmly as she slid onto his lap, reaching tenderly to the hair that swept around her bruise. "Ye okay now?" he whispered.

She nodded, fighting the stiffness in the muscles of her neck. "What happened, Alex? Please tell me something I can at least try to understand." The material of his shirt was scorched yet the birthmark beneath was unharmed.

Both shoulders heaved with a raspy sigh; the skin on his throat was an odd shade of light purple. "I'm not certain, Ceitag. Except he saved my life." Alex's lips parted to say more, but closed abruptly again, and he rested his forehead on her shoulder. Kate wound her fingers in his dark hair, while throwing her questioning glance now to Tim, who merely shook his head in bewilderment.

"There are no traces of this MacGregor," Tim said. "We looked through the whole crypt, tunnel and all. Nothing."

"Did he get out the other end?" Mally asked. She, too, seemed to be reaching desperately for some logic.

Tim blinked once before shaking his head again. "No. It's caved in with rock. A cockroach couldn't slither out that way."

Kate shivered, holding Alex ever tighter, feeling the warmth of his embrace, which in turn comforted her. She had come so close to losing him, but now...

"That's not all," Tim went on. He lifted his glass, swallowing its contents audibly. "Her bones are gone. There is no trace of Katrina's remains in that crypt."

\* \* \* \*

Alex fastened the last button of his tunic and brushed the material of his kilt with

a short sweep of his hand. Adjusting the sporran, he gave one final check in the mirror and turned to Kate, who had watched him dress from the edge of the bed.

He looked every inch the brave warrior, the vision of Dougal's figure striding through the time-frozen hallway tickling her memory. But Alex was flesh and bone, and for that she was truly grateful.

Kneeling in front of her Alex reached into the pocket of the sporran and took out a gold ring. He peered at it before speaking, revolving the band to show the one raised diamond held firmly in place by four tiny claws. "This is verra old," he said softly. "Belonged to my mother passed to her through three generations. I thought it would end with me." Bottomless dark eyes focused on Kate with sincerity. "But it has no ended." He slipped the ring on her finger while she choked emotion behind tightly pressed lips. "It has only begun. Ceitag, I love ye. I'll make ye proud to be my wife."

Touched by deep sentiment, Kate's fingers fluttered to the ring and then to the long strong fingers that wrapped securely around her wrist. "I am proud already," she whispered.

He shifted nervously, glancing sideways yet seeing nothing, his dark eyes clouded with thought, his mind searching for words.

"What is it?" she asked, finally bringing his restlessness to attention.

He startled, as though he was certain the troubled expression would go unnoticed. One corner of his mouth twitched in a smile at the discovery and then disappeared as he now concentrated carefully. "We've been together, quite a few times, and...." He stopped. Characteristically he was hoping to say merely a few words and that she would put the rest together. Kate wasn't about to allow his trepidation easy dissolution and held innocently back, forcing him to go on.

"I ne'er asked ye whether or not ... I mean ... I always figured women would ... ye know, precautions and all." He slumped in frustration. "Help me here, Ceitag. I'm making a mess."

"Um, you are. You should know by now you can ask me anything. We are going to be husband and wife, after all."

This seemed to comfort him. His soft face lit up like a bulb. "Aye, this is true." He took a huge breath and plunged. "Is there any chance ye could be with child?"

Alex immediately dropped his gaze and flushed.

The words hung shyly in the air and his brow furrowed with regret. "I shouldna...."

Kate cupped his cheeks in her palms, forcing his abashed stare to focus on her. "It's okay. You have a right to ask and I don't mind you doing so."

He listened, patiently waiting for her answer. He didn't even blink.

"No. There is no chance. But that doesn't mean there can't be future possibilities."

The olive skin on his cheeks creased in a warm smile. And for a long time they simply looked into each other's faces. The need for words had vanished, yet between them a conversation long, and precious, and full of promise, ending only as he leaned forward to flutter a short kiss on her lips.

He pulled far enough away that she saw his brow crinkle with an internal argument, one that seemed to be resolved with lightning speed. Both his hands firmly held her head as he drew a deep sensuous breath and then dove to her mouth, his full lips

now lapping a fervent kiss, pushing her back into the bed.

A whimper of immediate longing erupted from deep within her heart and she squirmed beneath his bulk, desperately discarding unwanted clothing. His hands aided the removal, blurred together in frantic want. He drew up when the pile of clothes on the floor was complete and scanned her body as she lay, vulnerable before his power and his need to have her in every sense.

Alex crawled over, edging her legs apart with his knee, locking his stare now to her eyes, the silent communication beginning again. *I love ye, the black pools said clearly. I will always love ye. Forever. There is nothing left in this world or the next that could keep our hearts from being one. I will ne'er let ye go. Neither ye nor the bairn that waits for us.*

The plush velvet of his tunic pressed her torso and she couldn't help but giggle at its tickle against her bare flesh. Her smile faded into the seriousness of sensuality, however, when Alex hoisted his kilt, revealing his naked arousal beneath.

Wet heat radiated through her mouth as he lunged a penetrating kiss, soon followed by the lowering of his body sharply into her. The weight was sufficient enough to draw out a laden gasp and as he thrust mercilessly between her legs, she yielded, crossing her ankles over the small of his back.

With every slide he whimpered, both the motion and its accompanying vocalization growing stronger and louder than the last.

Kate dug her fingernails into the velvet material across his chest, watching the ruffle of lace at his neck dangle down on her chin, brushing a faint musty smell over her skin. The wool from his raised kilt scratched her stomach and she closed her lids to luxuriate in every glorious erotic wave.

His lips found her ear and he struggled with each word. "Thank ye for saving me, Ceitag. I am forever that wee pebble in yer pocket."

"Our fantasies have come true," she whispered in return. His hips slowed slightly at her voice. "Our hearts are one."

"They always have been." And with that his trust quickened, his torso shivered and their cries of absolution wound through the air and fell into a lull of oneness.

Kate knew that however long she lived she would never lose this moment, lying within his arms in the stillness of their slowing heartbeats. The peace within their souls could be directly attributed to the two lovers who had reached through the mists of time and found each other in the purifying flames. Finally they could rest, together, as Kate now did with Alex. Happiness was obtainable, and Kate was so filled with gratefulness she felt her very breast would burst.

And the ring on her finger sparkled with the reflection of his promise.

Alex stirred, kissed her once more and then whispered, "Come, my love. We must now go and show our thanks before the day dies completely."

Not understanding, but certainly willing to follow, Kate dressed and followed her lover into the dimming shadows of the courtyard. He took her hand and led her through the charred foyer. She glanced sideways at the hole beneath what was left of the stairway and suppressed a shiver. It no longer yawned or sighed or reached out towards her. It was simply there, a testament to the past, the conflict gone.

Tim and Mally were standing arm in arm in the garden, waiting. Their faces were glowing with private words, and Kate felt embarrassed to be interrupting, but once Alex

came into view they moved to him with expectancy. Alex nodded to them politely, brushed the front of his jacket and took a deep breath before leading the way to the place where they had found Dougal's grave marker.

Kate was unsure what their presence at the warrior's final resting place would accomplish, but she suspected that Alex, dressed proudly in his plaid, wanted to honor the man who had helped to vanquish an age-old curse of unrequited love that had plagued the residents of Kirkland Hall for four hundred years--to say nothing of the final destruction of his own haunting past. And she, too, would commend her own small whisper of gratitude.

Alex lowered his straight frame beside the grave, wide eyed in one final surprise of a day that surpassed all laws of normality. Kate followed his gaze, then Mally, and then Tim. A collective gasp was followed by stunned silence.

On top of the stone lay the sword, the MacTamhais sword, and wrapped round the thistle carved handle was a delicate chain with a locket. The same locket that Kate had last seen during moments of what she had concluded was delirium.

Alex looked up at Kate who knelt beside him now, reaching for the locket, more to grasp the reality of its existence than to see what could be on the inside. The chain, finely knitted, gave way at her touch as she picked it up and sprung open the lid. Inside were two painted miniatures, faces they both instantly recognized as not only Dougal and Katrina, but their own.

She turned to Alex in weary silence, her emotions too spent to be overwrought. Yet she embraced the magnitude of the existence; this was a gift from the past, one final gesture of thanks to the living, those who had helped two lonely souls in their search to find once lost love.

Not forgotten. Misplaced.

Now found and remembered in reverence.

"It's over," Alex said, his voice clear and strong with conviction. "It's over."

Heat flooded through Kate's body like a wave crashing on a pebbled beach. And for the next few seconds she was weightless, floating in a release shared by those with her, here in this special time and place. Yet also shared by a clan chief called Dougal MacTamhais, who had solely loved and dedicated himself to a fair-faced maiden named Katrina, the love of his life, his soul mate, chosen for eternity.

Wiping a solitary tear from her cheek, Kate took Alex's hand as they stood, still staring at the eroded lettering on the marker.

"Are we going to take the...." Kate began but Alex's squeeze stopped her from finishing the question.

The sword and the locket were to remain there. Alex had decided. Kate would not argue.

"Be happy now, Father," he whispered in prayer-like reverence. "As long as my heart beats, your love will ne'er be forgotten." His fingers tapped his brow and the front of his tunic in the motion of a cross and after a brief moment he signaled that it was now time to leave.

The past was over. The future beginning.

They followed the narrow trail back towards the garden in single file, the light of a summer day finally fading in earnest. Long shadows had muted into an evenly distributed dullness and a faint chill of autumn wafted from the slight breeze. The bright

round sphere of the early evening moon hovered near the horizon, calling.

Reaching the steps of the garden patio, Kate took hold of Alex's arm and they turned, to give one last silent bid of farewell.

And there, over the grave, silhouetted against the expanse of moon, enveloped within the other's arms, stood the shimmering figures: the noble warrior proudly dressed in his MacTamhais regalia and his true love, her long flowing dress twirling in an unfelt breeze. The sword hung by his side, and although they were too far away to see clearly, Kate knew in her heart the locket was securely fastened round Katrina's slim neck.

They were staring intently into each other's eyes. Time meant nothing now because they had each other, and as Dougal bowed to kiss her, his long black curls shrouded her completely, twining with her glistening auburn locks. Then a shiver rippled, and the light surrounding them faded, taking the lovers away to be together for as long as time would dare to exist.

Kate's fingers inched into the pocket of her sweater, where she rubbed the smooth edges of a small white stone. Pulling it slowly from its hiding place, she brought it to her lips for one last kiss and then threw it to the gravel within the garden.

She fell into Alex's arms, her eyes brimming with tears of happiness.

The journey over but just begun, she had found her fantasy, and knew that a love this strong would never be forgotten.

The End