

Gareth

The Ghosts of Culoden Moor, #5

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.



To Bree. Lover of ghost stories.

They say revenge is sweet...

Lissa Stuart is thrilled to get a job researching for an upcoming movie in Scotland—supposedly the land of her ancestors. When she brags about possibly being related to Bonnie Prince Charlie, she captures the attention of an angry, embittered warrior.

Revenge is all that Gareth thought about for the last 270 years. According to a witch helping him and the other warriors stuck at Culloden Moor, it's not his turn to come back to life—but that doesn't matter to him in the least! When he gets a shot at a flesh and blood existence, if only for a few days, he seizes it!

If he has his way, this time the last word will not come from the living, but from the dead.

Chapter 1

Just after the Summer Solstice

Lissa Stuart was thoroughly engrossed in the short film when her phone vibrated. It was Perry Fellner, her boss. She considered not answering, but knew if she didn't, he'd go into a frenzy of repeat calls, texts, and long voice messages. She walked out of the visitors center Battle Immersion Theater and into the main lobby. "Hello?"

"Lissa. What's going on? What are you doing?"

Seriously? What did Perry think she was doing? "Research, of course." She didn't bother to mention she'd only arrived in Scotland four hours ago and jumped right on it. He wouldn't care.

"Where are you?"

She walked past a musket display and the Battle Table to stand beside a brightly colored wall where she could have some privacy. "I'm at the visitors center at Culloden Moor."

"In Scotland?"

She suppressed a sigh. "Yes, in Scotland."

"I hope you're getting some good stuff. This movie needs the details to be authentic."

She rolled her eyes. "And when have I ever let you down?"

He chuckled. "You haven't. That's why I pay you the big bucks."

"That's true. So why are you bothering me?"

"Sorry. Sorry. I know you don't like to be micromanaged."

"And yet..."

He chuckled again. "Have you got any photos to show me?"

"I'm pretty sure I already sent a batch."

"Oh. Right. Right."

"Look, I've got to go. I'll keep you posted."

"Okay, you do that. Get me the good stuff, kid. And if Clive Simpson calls, tell him to stuff it where the sun don't shine." He laughed. "You're working for me now!"

She knew he wasn't joking. Between Perry and Clive, they kept her busier than she cared to be. Both movie producers tried to reserve all her time and attention—and pouted if she was tied up working for the other. If she told them a third producer was now trying to romance her away, they'd both flip.

"Will do. I'll talk to you later."

So far, she absolutely loved Scotland with its gorgeous purple hues, moorlands, and glens. And as always, she adored historical research. What she didn't love was working with demanding and slightly petulant movie producers. They were always a pain in her backside.

The phone vibrated, and she glanced at it, half expecting Perry again. Worse, it was Mason Baldwin, actor extraordinaire. In his own mind, anyway. The guy was a gorgeous psycho, bent on seducing his way onto the silver screen. Lately, he'd gotten it in his mind that since Perry listened to her, she could get him an acting job in Perry's new film. Preferably a leading role, of course.

She turned off her phone. Before she'd gotten to really know him, the guy had hurt her feelings when she'd taken his interest seriously. Cara, best friend and all around party girl, wanted to maim the guy. Or at least get him in her makeup chair so she could make him appear hideous in his next role. Never mess with a make-up artist. They could stall out your career with some well-placed blusher if you got on their bad side.

"'Tis a lovely day, is it not?"

Lissa glanced down into the happy, somewhat mischievous face of a black-robed teen and couldn't help but smile in return. The girl was breathtakingly beautiful. "Yes, it is."

"I've heard the good weather is supposed to hold."

She grinned at the young lady's accent. Lissa didn't doubt the girl was a little heartbreaker. "I hope so. I'll be traipsing around in it."

"Aye, ye will at that."

Lissa's brows rose as she looked at the girl in question.

"And I'd say ye ought to get started now. No time like the present, aye?" She tilted her head. "Out those doors adventure awaits ye."

Lissa glanced toward the exit and to the flat fields of green grass and blue skies beyond, then back again.

The girl was gone.

She glanced about, turned an entire circle, but didn't spot the young lady. That was weird. But there were plenty of places to disappear among the displays and hallways so, taking a breath, she shrugged it off. Jet lag was obviously starting to hit her. Wanting to clear her head, she headed out the doors the girl had indicated. When the cool air hit, she stood looking at the level fields of green, and the heather and gorse beyond. It was hard to believe so many young men had breathed their last in such a beautiful setting.

"Miss? Can I help ye?" She glanced up to see a security guard, mid-forties or so, with a thick head of brown hair, his hands securely fastened to his belt.

She returned his smile. "I'm just looking around."

"Are ye here on vacation?"

"I'm here for both business and pleasure. This is lovely." She gestured toward the field of green in front of them. "It's hard to believe such a tragedy occurred here and that so many died."

"That it is. Do ye enjoy history?"

"Yes, I love it. I'm especially interested in Culloden Moor. If my dad is to be believed, it's possible we are directly descended from Bonnie Prince Charlie himself."

"Shh." The guard pressed a finger to his lips and glanced around. "Ye wouldn't want the ghosts to overhear ye," he said with a wink.

"Ghosts?"

"Yes. A lot of men died here because mistakes were made."

"And there are ghosts?" Perry would love that aspect.

"Some say they've seen them."

"And what do you say?"

"I say, 'tis the same as a zoo. Dinnae feed the wild animals." He tapped a finger to the side of his nose. "With talk of The Young Pretender, that is. If ye be a blood relation, best keep it to yerself around these parts."

She smiled at him, enjoying his brogue and personality. "As I'm afraid of ghosts, I'll heed your advice."

"Now dinnae be heedin' it too closely. I'm curious about yer ancestry."

"My name is Lissa Stuart."

The man's eyes widened. "Is it now?"

She shrugged. "Apparently, Bonnie Prince Charlie did not know his daughter Charlotte gave birth to three illegitimate children. So they disappeared into the mists of history until researchers in the 1950's proved otherwise."

She grinned. "Now, the American version of the story differs somewhat. Supposedly Charlotte's son traveled to the Americas where he fathered an illegitimate son. My great-great-something-grandmother took his last name, and pretended to be a widow. She bought into his wild stories about being the true heir

to Bonnie Prince Charlie, and ever since, our family has proudly claimed ties to the true royal family.”

The guard looked astonished. “Is that so?”

She winked at him. “Or, maybe Great Grandma simply had a vivid imagination.”

“So ye dinnae believe it yerself?”

She shrugged. “It makes for good conversation between strangers. Especially here in Scotland.”

He chuckled. “Well, as I said, Culloden Moor might not be the place to tell such tales, so we’ll just be keepin’ it between ourselves.”

She smiled. “From this moment on, my lips are sealed.” She made a locking motion against her mouth and pretended to throw away the key.

A sudden coldness slipped through the layers of her jacket and shirt and she shivered. “Did you feel that?”

“I did, indeed. I told ye to be careful of claiming certain relations around here, didn’t I? Now ye’ve roused the ghosts, haven’t ye?”

She chuckled, going along with the joke, but wondered if she’d actually roused them. “Well, I’d better be going. I missed half the film, so I’ll probably be back tomorrow.”

“Where are ye stayin’?”

“Just down the road at the Leanach Bed and Breakfast.”

“That’s a good place. Weel, perhaps I’ll see ye tomorrow. Good day to ye, miss.”

“Good day.” She waved at him and headed toward the tree-lined parking lot. The cold followed her and goosebumps broke out on her body. She knew she was imagining it, but a malevolence stirred the cool air, and she couldn’t help glancing over her shoulder.

A man strode after her, lifted a claymore, and swung at her head.

She gasped, ducked, closed her eyes and yelped, all at the same time.

When nothing happened, she glanced up to clearly see the image of a man. See through him, anyway. He was tall, muscular, black-haired, and his face twisted with hatred. Breathing hard, he lifted the claymore once more and cut her in half.

Or tried to, anyway. She flinched, glanced up, and watched him fade to mist and disappear.

She straightened, still breathing hard, and glanced around in fright.

What had just happened? Did they have some sort of hologram in place? If they did, she wasn’t amused. They could give people heart attacks by springing such things on unsuspecting tourists.

Or could they really have ghosts?

She glanced around, but all she saw was the grass waving as the sun warmed her once more.

Had she imagined the entire thing?

She knew she was jet lagged. She’d dropped her things off at the bed and breakfast before heading straight here. It probably hadn’t been a great idea. Hadn’t she once heard jet lag was the equivalent of drunkenness?

She glanced around once more, shook her head, and headed to her rental car. She was driving straight to her bed and breakfast and hopping between the covers.

She glanced over her shoulder as she headed for her rental car, and chuckled, albeit a bit uneasily. Even in a place like this, there were no such things as ghosts. Right?

It was a trick. Just like the eerie green light swirling about the girl.

He paced behind the others as they gathered around Soncerae, and he tried to remember.

He was number 26. It wasn't his name, he knew that, but it had been his moniker for far longer than the one his parents bestowed.

He'd died at age twenty and seven. Or, rather, had been led like a lamb to the slaughter and left to die. He knew that, too.

He lost himself occasionally, faded away, but tended to waken when the strength of his anger renewed, or when Soncerae neared.

He couldn't seem to stop the rages, and even his brothers avoided him now. As well they might, as he was the one who'd talked them into this misery.

The others avoided him as well—his brothers in arms. Faithful men who'd stood at his side, followed him, marched with him, starved with him... and finally died with him.

Soncerae, or rather Soni as they called her, the wee little witch was back, and as the hours went by, his mind muddled. Number 18 had gone first. She claimed she could give them all a chance at revenge. When she'd first spoken of it, he'd not wanted to hurt her feelings and pretended to believe. He'd a soft spot for the young lassie—they all did—she'd strengthened their interest from the moment she'd come, a wee babe pushed in a pram. They'd watched her grow into a beautiful young woman and something stirred within, a spark, whenever she approached.

How could such a young lass provide a chance at revenge?

When she spoke so casually of Charles Stuart, or rather, Bonnie Prince Charlie, his anger simmered, but not his belief in any chance at revenge. She was playacting, and he'd a mind to indulge her, though she knew not what emotions she pricked by making such promises.

When 18 disappeared, it was troubling, but not surprising. He'd probably done so to please the wee witch and, even now, was doubtless lying twisted in a mass grave, awaiting a chance to rejoin them, to confirm her story and play to her vanity.

He'd not fault the girl. All girls were vain at sixteen. Lately, he'd remembered his sister again. At that age she'd been flirting, teasing, causing Mum and Da all sorts of trouble.

But then number 64 had left, and 48 as well.

And now Soni had called forth his middle brother, number 75.

What if it wasn't playacting? What if it wasn't a trick? He could feel his ire rising, his formless body wavering. Not a new sensation by any means, but new when directed toward Soni. He'd had enough of lies and deceptions. What did she want of this? Perhaps she'd been sent by Charles Stuart himself to send them all to the very devil.

It was his job to protect the others—most especially his brothers—whether they wanted it or not.

"Aiden MacGregor? Number 75?"

He could see his brother debating, hovering, before drifting slowly forward.

Gareth soared faster, pushing against the mass of wraiths, plowing through them to reach her first. "Take me instead, lass."

Soni's head shot up, her beautiful eyes wary. "Gareth, I know a great wrong was done ye, but it was done to all and 'tis not yer turn."

Gareth. That was aright. He was Gareth Alexander Sutherland MacGregor, son of John and Mary MacGregor, in command of infantry under Lord George Murray. He didn't care about that now. He cared what happened to his younger brother. "I've said I'm to go next, and I meant what I said. I'll not be naysayed by a young chit such as yerself." His tone was as hard as the *Mixed Clan* gravestone lying atop his bones.

"Dinnae speak to her in such a way!"

"Haud yer wheesht, mon!"

"Shut yer geggy or I'll close it for ye!"

The murmurs behind him turned into roars of protest, but he'd not budge. "If ye be serious about lettin' us face the prince, I'll be the one what speaks with him next." Bitterness chilled his voice.

Soni gazed at him, her beautiful eyes filling with sadness. "I'm sorry, Gareth. As I said, 'tis not yer turn."

"Let him go!"

"Aye, let the haverin jobby leave!"

"We'd be better off without the sumph!"

"Let him go afore he ruins it for the rest of us!"

More murmurs of agreement from the wall of wraiths at his back.

He turned so as to yell back at them. "Ye want me to calm, d'ye, ya Jacobite jabbers! Are ye forgettin' the way ye bled out on this field, empty-bellied and half-dead, while yer precious pretender left us to die in the mud and muck as he ran, his tail firmly tucked between his legs! *And now we've his kin showin' up and tourin' the place at their fancy!*" He roared the last.

"His kin?"

"What does he mean?"

"Who's he goin' on about?"

He turned his back on the murmurs behind him. He ignored them all to stare at Soni. "Weel, lass?"

"I dinnae believe ye're ready to do a good deed," Soni said gently. "Without it, ye'll not face the prince, so it'd be a waste of your turn."

"Dinnae worry over me. I'll do my good deed, right enough." After the Stuart girl was dead, he'd find a deserving soul. He'd not miss his chance over a Stuart, that was for sure.

Soni sighed. "Ye need a chance to calm and accept what's happenin'."

They were arguing over something he still didn't understand and wasn't convinced was real. And why would he trust? Dead as dust was his reality. Had been for 270 years. This was most likely as he'd thought. A trick. He'd soon know one way or the other, and she could be sure he'd not fade away just to please her.

"Ye told 18 he must ensure a good turn so as to face the prince. Is there aught else to know?"

She sighed. "I thought ye'd want yer brothers to go before ye. I thought ye'd want to make sure they were all right. You've always protected them, why would ye want to change now?"

She tried to calm him, but it would do no good; not with a Stuart to contend with. He knew where she was now, and might not later. "I've my reasons lass, and ye willnae be swayin' me."

She sighed. "I hoped ye'd see sense, but I'm in charge here, and I'm lettin' another go first. Aiden, number 75, come forward, laddie." She sounded firm, decisive.

Aiden drifted closer, shooting his brother a searching look. "I'm willin' to give up me place. I can wait well enough."

Suddenly the witch looked cross enough to stamp a foot as she'd done once as a tot. "*Do as I say.*" Her hands rose and green mist swirled about her as she faced Aiden.

Gareth put his entire will behind his destination—Culloden Moor—and rushed into Aiden's place.

Soni looked panicked. "I cannae stop it!"

Gareth's mouth curved into a grim smile. "Then dinnae try. Remember, but three days. My first is taken with a task."

"I dinnae know if I can!"

"Three days, lass!"

If he had his way, there'd be naught left for the rest of them. They'd have to move on with the knowledge he'd dispatched The Young Pretender to perdition and the man roasted in torment, agony, and pain.

Unless it truly was a trick.

He was wrenched, guts torn asunder as dizziness and pain beset him.

Blood, flesh, breath—all filled with life once more.

He stood facing the others, faded now, their shock no less than his own.

'Twas *not* a trick!

Satisfaction roared through him.

The witch smiled, briefly, a tugging of lips quickly suppressed.

Whole and hearty, he lurched forward, revenge at hand!

"*Gareth, wait!*"

He refused to listen. The last he'd been alive, obeying had left him dead and rotting on a field before being tossed into a mass grave atop his brothers.

The prince would pay now. Gareth was reborn to make him.

His strides lengthened as his pain lessened. Gareth had no kin. No blood. No chance of children or grandchildren. None of them had. Why should the prince? He might not know how to get to the man—yet—but knew very well how to get at his kin.

He was drawn toward the road where the Stuart lass disappeared. Mayhap she'd others with her. All the more to kill.

The Young Pretender had run away, tail tucked firmly between his legs, and gone on to live to father a child who'd given him grandchildren.

The man should've died with them on the field that day. Should've been there to shout orders before the cannon and grapeshot plowed through them as they'd waited as trained.

Soni still called after him. *"Ye're bullheaded, that ye are! 'Tis yer biggest flaw!"*

He barely heard her.

"Wait! 'Tis not how it was meant to be. Come back!"

He'd not listen anymore. He ran now, for all he was worth, his destination clear as only one fact disgruntled him.

Why had the witch smiled?

Chapter 2

Lissa pulled on her pajama pants and tee shirt. It had been a long day, and as thrilled as she was to be in Scotland, she really needed to get some rest. Though how she'd be able to sleep was a mystery to her. She'd wanted to come here for so long, it felt like a dream come true.

The fact it was paid for by someone else made it even better.

Surprisingly, it actually felt like a homecoming. Maybe her dad was right and they really were related to Bonnie Prince Charlie. One of these days, she might have to spend the money to hire a genealogist to find out. Her dad would be thrilled if they actually received some sort of documentation. No doubt he'd frame the papers and show the proof to any unsuspecting folks who might happen by—friends and salesmen alike.

She thought again about the weird ghostly apparition that attacked earlier. Had she really seen it? Or had her overactive imagination been at work? In retrospect, it seemed silly. Like a dream or something she'd made up. Perhaps a good imagination was simply an occupational hazard in her line of work.

Her phone rang and she picked it up to see it was her best friend Cara calling. "Hello?"

"Are there any hot Scotsmen about? How many have you seen so far?"

Lissa laughed. "Exactly none, point none." Again she thought about the ghostly apparition. "Well, maybe one. But I'm not sure a ghost counts."

"You saw a ghost?" Cara sounded excited.

"I'm not really sure, it was probably just a combination of jet lag, the euphoria of actually being in Scotland, and some of the haggis I ate."

Cara chuckled. "Liar. You did not eat haggis."

Lissa grinned. "Okay, not yet."

"Like I said, ten bucks if you do. So you imagined a hot ghost? Nice! And how is Scotland?"

"It's gorgeous. You can't possibly believe it. I wish you could have come with me."

"Me, too. But I'll be there when we make the movie! So excited!"

"Yeah, I can't wait. I'm really jazzed about this one. I can't wait to delve into the research."

"Freak. I want to visit a few pubs, see Loch Ness, and find me a hot Scotsman."

"You know Nessie was a fake, right?"

"Believe what you want."

Lissa chuckled. "As for any hot Scotsmen, I'll scout the situation."

“Maybe you need an assistant. Perhaps you should tell Perry.”

Lissa laughed, and again, the image of the apparition, otherwise and forevermore known as *The Scary, Hot Scotsman*, popped into her head. “Nope. I want first shot. With you around I wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Whatever. You with your gorgeous honey blonde hair and blue eyes. If you’d stop looking like Scarlett Johansson I could take your claims more seriously.”

“That guy just said I looked like her to get a date!”

“That makes three times you’ve been mistaken for her.”

“If I didn’t live in Hollywood no one would make comparisons.”

“You’re not in Hollywood now. Which, of course, compels me to remind you to wear makeup on this trip. You never know. You, pouring over musty manuscripts, look up and there he is. Hot, brogue speaking Scotsman, practically falling at your feet. Wear lipstick, too, okay?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Whatever. I know you’ll forget. So, how many times has good old Perry called so far?”

“Just once. He made me miss the short movie at the visitors center, so I’m going back again tomorrow.”

Cara laughed. “He’s losing his touch. You know, I think he’d go for you in a big way, except he’s afraid if it didn’t work out, which it never does with him, you’d refuse to work for him anymore.”

“Thanks for the heads up. If he tries anything, I’ll threaten to quit.”

Cara chuckled. “That would do it.”

Lissa yawned. “I’m going to bed. The sun just went down and I want a fresh start early in the morning.”

“Nighty night. Keep me updated, and especially let me know if you see a hot Scotsman hanging around. Take pictures.”

“If I see a hot Scotsman, I’m keeping him to myself.”

“Well, I can’t fault you there, but if he has a brother, think of me! Which reminds me, did you find the Highlander romance novel I stuck in your backpack?”

“Yes. Great cover, by the way.”

“Yeah, the guy is yummy. But if I was there with you, I’d be living the dream instead of reading about it, so don’t feel you have to read it, hint, hint.”

“We’ll see if you’re all talk when you come over here for the movie. Goodnight.”

Cara was giggling. “Okay, I’ll talk to you later. Dream of Highlanders!”

Shaking her head, Lissa wandered over to the second floor window to get a last glimpse of Scotland before she went to bed.

She stilled. The ghost from the visitors center strode across the lawn.

At least it looked like him. The outfit was the same, as was the wild and braided black hair.

Surprise, and a little bit of fear, held her immobile.

He staggered a bit, and seemed a lot more substantial than he had earlier. Maybe she shouldn’t be afraid of ghosts, but of zombies, instead.

It couldn’t possibly be the same man. It was probably just some guy, headed home to his family, after an evening out binging.

He looked up at her and their eyes met. It looked like the same man, and he appeared determined rather than drunk, but the anger was still there, coldly simmering behind dark eyes.

She put her hand to her heart and stepped back from the window.

She knew it was silly, but why did she suddenly feel she was being stalked?

Gareth waited, hiding from the moonlight as, one by one, everyone in the house fell to sleep.

He was planning murder.

His mind, his temper, and his very soul seemed to have darkened, bent on revenge. An ugly swirling mass of emotion seemed to have settled in his now beating chest.

The back door was unlocked; he hadn't expected otherwise. But still, it was strange to twist a doorknob. He'd seen it done before at the visitors center and on the shows the guards watched. But he'd not done the like in person.

He ran his hand down his chest about the hundredth time. Felt his heartbeat, felt his warm flesh, bone, pumping blood. That didn't matter now. As soon as his chore was done, he could consider such happenings.

He moved, silent as a wraith to the kitchen, and still slightly disoriented, he lurched a bit but caught himself on the table and managed to stay quiet.

His night vision was excellent. Had it always been? Or was it a leftover from being a ghost? He couldn't remember. He spotted a knife on the kitchen counter, picked it up, and tested it for sharpness. He smiled. It was well honed and certainly sharp enough to get the task done.

There would be a lot of blood.

Perhaps he should take her outside, lure her somehow, so as to get her away from the good folk of the house. He didn't want interference, nor should the good woman of the establishment clean the mess he planned to make.

The girl was small enough he could place a hand over her mouth, pull her into his arms, and carry her outside.

But she'd kick and fight, wouldn't she? She might wake the house, and he didn't want that.

Perhaps he should simply squeeze the life out of her. He pictured his big hands clamped around Charles Stuart's neck, but the picture faded away to be replaced by a young woman, such as his sister.

His blood heated with the force of resentment. This woman shouldn't be alive, though, should she? Had The Young Pretender died with Gareth and his brothers in the blood and mud of that far off day, this girl wouldn't even exist, would she?

What right did this girl have to life?

If Charles Stuart had an ounce of honor in his soul, he'd have fought and died with them, or had the gumption to plan and lead them to another victory.

But instead, he'd slept, miles down the road in a warm bed as they'd crept upon the enemy, only to be ordered to turn themselves around—starved and frozen and without direction for the upcoming battle.

Gareth had a lot of time to think about it.

A lot of time to dwell upon the mistakes made, both in leadership and location. They'd been positioned in front of a bog! And a wall blocked others from entering

the battle! No call to fight had been uttered as they'd been massacred without mercy.

And this lass had nerve, had the outright gall to come to Culloden Moor? To proudly spout of being blood kin to the blackguard?

That she would dare!

He silently worked his way up the stairs, testing for creaks on the boards, and searching for the best footholds to hide his presence.

He finally made his way to her bedroom, the one he'd seen her in earlier. He eased his way into the room, still debating the wisdom of a knife, or choking the life out of the girl. Silent as the dead, eyes seeing very well in the dark, he stared down at the girl, no, the woman, in the bed.

Moonlight lit the window, the glow enough to light her face. She was beautiful, of course. As any kin of Bonnie's was bound to be. But she looked like a wee kitten, her dark blonde hair spread about the pillow, her full lips soft in sleep, innocent as a child.

That innocence made him angry!

He lifted the knife and his hand shook, as he debated plunging it into her chest or slicing her gullet.

She was Bonnie Prince Charlie's get! She'd die by Gareth's hand, and when she met the prince in hades—because Gareth had absolutely no doubt that's where the man resided—she'd be able to tell him that Gareth had personally killed her.

He studied her face again. Yes, she was beautiful. But she didn't resemble the prince. Not in the least. It would've been easier if she had.

He lifted the knife higher as heated blood flooded his veins. Surely he'd overheard her bragging earlier so he could finally have a chance to exact revenge! *He was supposed to do this!*

His arm shook. Heaving a breath, he lifted the knife higher, held it in place, then exhaled and lowered the knife to his side.

He couldn't do it.

He couldn't kill her.

She looked as innocent as those he used to protect. She was a woman. If she'd been a man, perhaps it would've been easier.

His gaze hardened. Mayhap he just needed a bit more time to gird himself to the task.

Aye. He'd take her with him, and when she reminded him of her grandfather, he'd work up the nerve, end her life, and send her as a message to Bonnie Prince Charlie.

By morning's light for sure.

Lissa was grabbed, mouth and hands bound, and draped over a broad shoulder before she even woke up.

Was this a dream?

She tried to move, but between the bindings and the hard arm trapping her to an even harder shoulder, she didn't stand a chance.

She tried to scream, but the fear coursing through her veins and the shoulder digging into her torso, prevented more than a squeak coming out. She was

immediately jostled, her solar plexus bouncing against hard muscle and robbing her of what little breath she'd accumulated.

The man grabbed her backpack with her wallet, laptop, and camera in it.

Was this a robbery? If so, he'd certainly taken her most valuable possessions.

She was quickly taken down the stairs, to the kitchen, and out the back door. Fear, lack of oxygen, and disbelief paralyzed and deprived her of movement. Then they were outside, and the man was striding away from the safety of the bed and breakfast, away from people and rescue.

She was completely helpless, she couldn't even ask what he wanted. Was she going to be raped? Murdered? Worse? Why was he doing this?

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she finally sucked in a breath and struggled. It did her no good and she was jostled and robbed of any breath she'd managed to suck into her lungs.

She was crying, soft sobbing muffled by the cloth. Why? Why had she been targeted? Because she was a woman? An American? Because she hated golf?

After about ten minutes, they arrived in a deserted field and every murder she'd ever heard of flashed through her mind. She was set on her feet then pushed to the ground. Was this it? Was it over? The massive behemoth pulled out a knife and a muffled shriek exploded out of her as she struggled backward across the hard ground.

He swooped down and, as she screamed, he cut her bindings.

Was he going to kill her?

With shaking fingers, she reached up to peel back the cloth settled between her lips. "What... what do you want?" Mouth dry, she dreaded his answer, was afraid she already knew it.

He was big, bigger than she'd imagined, and as there was a full moon tonight, she could see the ferocity in his expression.

She backed away, vulnerability scorching her as he stood above. "What do you want?" The words exploded from her again, though she wasn't sure she desired a response.

"What do I want?" The man's voice was deep, graveled with a Scottish accent, and forbidding. "I heard ye today, telling all who'd listen ye are flesh and blood to Charles Stuart."

"W... what?"

"I *loathe* Bonnie Prince Charlie."

She couldn't seem to grasp his meaning. "You hate Bonnie Prince Charlie?" He took another step forward and she scooted backward, her heart pounding with fear.

"*Hate?*" For every bit of ground she gained, he continued to pace forward. "Aye, ye could say such. To my verra bones, I abhor the man, hold him in disgust, despise him and wish him a thousand burnin', lingerin' deaths. I scorn him, revile him, belittle him and mock him. My contempt for the man seeps into every part of my being. Aye, lass, I do *hate* the man. To the blackest part of my soul."

She continued to back away, her fingers digging in dirt and long grass. Though it did her no good as he followed her every movement. "O... okay. But what does that have to do with me? The man's been dead for hundreds of years."

“He killed me, my brothers, and my comrades as surely as if he lit the cannons, stabbed us with bayonets, and loaded the muskets himself.”

She backed herself against a tree and sat upright. She licked her dry lips, wondering if the man had escaped a nearby institution. “But... but how? He’s been dead for hundreds of years.”

“I’ll be havin’ my revenge now, won’t I?”

Against her? She could make out a sword and a knife tucked into his belt. He started to pace back and forth in front of her, and she wasn’t sure what to say.

He continued to rant, speaking ill of her father now, claiming he’d kill him and the rest of her family as well—but especially her father and brothers.

What brothers? She was an only child.

She glanced around, searching for a chance at escape, for someone to help, but they were in a deserted location, an uneven, grass-covered field, the moon eerily shining down on them with no help of any kind in sight.

His rant now included the fact he was having a difficult time killing her, as she was a woman. She let out a shaky breath and thanked the Lord for that fact. “If you just let me go, I won’t tell anyone this happened. I promise.”

At that, he stopped to look at her. “Yer word means naught to me. I’ll keep ye with me until I work up the nerve to end ye.”

She swallowed.

“What’s yer name, girl?”

She wanted to lie to him, but was afraid to. What if he already knew? Was testing her, and would hurt her if she lied? “Lissa.”

“Lissa, from the house of Stuart?”

She nodded, relieved she’d told the truth. “Yes. Lissa Stuart.”

“Well, ye will listen, and listen well. I’m to keep ye for now, but I’ll probably be able to kill ye on the morrow.”

Chills shot up her spine and she exhaled sharply. “Tomorrow?” She strangled the word from her tight throat.

“Aye, lass. Prepare yerself. On the morrow I’ll no doubt be able to stomach the task.”

She nodded like a fool.

She needed to escape.

Quickly.

An insane man held her life in his hands.

Chapter 3

“My boss would probably be willing to pay good money to get me back.”

Gareth barely heard her. He was starving, and the realization brought him a spurt of surprise and joy. He could eat again? After years of watching people walk around the visitors center consuming meals, snacks, and desserts such as he’d never seen, the realization he could eat again was thrilling!

His stomach rumbled. The drive was urgent, by the sounds of it.

He grabbed the girl's pack. It took him a moment to figure out how to open it, but he finally succeeded. He rooted around for a moment, then dumped everything out, staring down at equipment, sandals, a book, and a hairbrush. His lip curled in disgust. "Ye've not any food in yer pack?"

Eyes wide with fear, she shook her head.

His lips tightened. "Who leaves a pack lyin' about with no food in it?"

She shrugged, and wrapped her arms around her knees.

Grabbing up his knife, he gestured toward her. "Come, we're to go forage. We'll need supplies to last the night."

Her pretty blue eyes widened with hope. "You're right. We should go buy some food. I'm hungry, too. It'll be my treat."

Food in his belly might be just what he needed to settle his conscience. Then he'd truly be capable of killing the woman on the morrow.

She quickly slid on the sandals, put everything back in her pack, closed it up, and slung it on her back. They walked through the distance until they came to a house.

"Ye're to stay here. If ye're not here when I get back, I'll kill the people inside in yer stead." He wouldn't truly, but he hoped his words would keep her in place.

She nodded, and sank to the ground.

He walked a few feet and could feel the rage building in him again. Charles Stuart hadn't cared about the young men killed in his stead for his unjust cause. As his blood kin, why would she?

He'd gone but a short distance when he saw clothing hanging from a bit of rope. He cut the rope and headed back to the girl and grabbed her wrists.

She tugged. "No, please don't."

Not bothering to argue, he subdued her struggles, quickly tied her hands behind her back, and bound her feet. The bit of cloth was still about her neck, and he lifted it into place to gag her.

She thrashed her head. "No, stop. I won't call out. I swear it."

He didn't bother to argue. When she was bound and gagged, he set off once again in search of food.

The back door was unbarred. He moved in silence to find the kitchen, once again, close at hand. Food was simply lying about. He found a bag, emptied it, and stuffed familiar foods inside. Bread, apples, the bananas he'd seen and wanted to try, and more. He opened the cold food storage and found meats and cheeses and what looked to be bottled wine. As soon as he'd filled his sack, he hurried outside.

She was still there. Rather than untie her, he hauled her, pack and all, over his shoulder and headed down the road. He found another field, settled her next to some bushes that hid them from the path, and removed her gag.

He opened the bag and proceeded to eat. The food was *wondrous*. Never had he eaten food so fine in his life. The drink tasted of apples. After he'd eaten his fill, he sliced a bit of cheese. "Would ye care for some?"

"Will you untie me?"

"I could feed ye."

"No, thanks."

He shrugged, finished the cheese, belched, and then wrapped his plaid around himself and lay down. Her shivering kept him awake, and he wished he'd stolen a

blanket. He finally sat up, set his weapons aside, and pulled her toward him. He untied her hands and wrapped her within his plaid, lay them both down, and buried his face in her cloud of hair.

She went completely stiff.

“I’ll not molest yer person, if that’s what worries ye.”

She slowly relaxed.

He drifted off to sleep, his arms tight about her. Good food and a soft, clean-smelling woman. He was feeling more himself by the moment.

He would most likely kill her in the morning.

Lissa lay still for a long while, absorbing the warmth of his body. The guy was a furnace. If she wasn’t so afraid, she might actually enjoy the feel of masculine strength wrapped around her for the first time in... well... forever.

Earlier, he’d said he’d kill people in her stead, but hadn’t harmed her. She hoped he hadn’t harmed anyone at her bed and breakfast. She hadn’t heard anything.

That was good, right?

And she did appreciate him telling her he wasn’t about to molest her. She actually believed him. Perhaps she was just fooling herself in a haze of hysteria; but whatever his delusion, he seemed to truly believe it.

She slowly exhaled. She’d just had to go to the visitors center and announce she was related to Bonnie Prince Charlie, didn’t she?

She wasn’t even sure if it was true. In her opinion, it was more of a family legend than anything else.

How was she to know someone would find that bit of family lore extremely offensive?

She lay still for a long while listening to the guy breathe. When she was convinced he was asleep, she tried to creep out from under his plaid. She slowly turned left and right to loosen it, but escape seemed impossible. He’d wrapped it in such a way that she might as well have been inside a tight sleeping bag.

Neat trick, that.

At least she was warmish—heated everywhere he touched her and chilled where he didn’t. The man really did put off a lot of heat. With her feet still tied, she couldn’t really do much; so she tried inching her way to the top, as it was a sleeping bag, but his arms tightened.

“Stay still, lass. If ye irritate me, I may kill ye now, instead of on the morrow.”

Kill her?

She inhaled. So he’d meant it earlier?

She went limp, despairing. “Why are you doing this?”

He didn’t answer.

She still didn’t understand why he cared so much, but she needed to tell him she wasn’t related to Bonnie Prince Charlie in any way, shape, or form. Just because her dad believed it, didn’t make it true. She’d always thought it fanciful; and okay, a little fun to be connected to long ago royalty.

Never again. If she got out of this, she’d deny any such relation to her dying breath.

She lay quiet, trying to logic the whole thing out. Could the man be on drugs? If he was, that might be a good thing. He might wake in the morning and not even remember the night before, let alone who she was. Her spirits lifted a bit.

He'd certainly had the munchies. Didn't that go hand in hand with drug use?

Besides being kidnapped, the weirdest thing was she could clearly remember seeing him earlier outside the visitors center. She'd thought him a ghost, or a hologram, but now here he was, larger than life and more real than anyone she'd ever met.

She'd wait a few more minutes, then try and escape again. At this point, what did she have to lose? She'd just wait a bit longer... close her eyes and snuggle close to his heat...

She was out before she'd finished the thought.

As dawn broke, Gareth woke slowly. He'd slept, but not the empty, dreamless sleep of the dead. This time it was a mortal sleep—revitalization and replenishment. He'd not experienced the like in hundreds of years and barely remembered the wonder of it.

Grinning, he yawned and stretched to the best of his ability, bound as he was to the girl.

Loosening his plaid, he leaned up on one elbow to watch her sleep. She truly was beautiful. Everything about her was honey-colored in dawn's light. Her hair, the curve of her cheek, the soft-looking skin on her neck. All but her pink-kissed lips, the upper of which dipped sharply in the middle, the lower plumped out and curved, as if begging to be kissed.

He exhaled harshly. Where had that thought come from?

How was he supposed to kill her while thinking such things? He shouldn't be watching her sleep. If he had to kill her, he didn't want to remember her face. But with the warm heat of her pressed against him, her softness, he was having a difficult time remembering why she had to die. The longer he studied her beautiful face, slack with sleep, yet with a furrow in her brow that admitted to worry, he felt his heart softening.

He blew out another harsh breath.

He should've killed her last night.

He grabbed her by the shoulder and shook her.

She startled, and again, he didn't care for the deepening worry in her face. It brought out protective instincts he shouldn't be feeling.

They both sat up, facing each other. He yanked his plaid out from under her, wrapped himself in it, and started in with questions. "What is yer full name?"

She glanced around, as if unsure where she was, before despair sank into her expression.

He didn't like that either. It made him want to curl her close and keep her safeguarded against trouble. "Yer name, lass."

"I told you last night. Lissa Stuart. It's Lissa Marie Stuart."

"Ah, ha!" He lifted a finger in the air. "Named for The Young Pretender's mother no doubt. Ye dinnae deny it then? It's a Stuart ye are? And who are your parents? Where are they? Why aren't they with you?"

Her brow furrowed in confusion. "Uh... I'm 26 years old. Why would they be?"

“Are ye married, then?” He didn’t know why, but he didn’t like that thought at all.

“No.”

He let out a breath and scowled. “Then why wouldn’t yer parents be with you?” He knew things had changed over the years, had witnessed goings on at the visitors center that confused him, but some things should never change. Unmarried daughters ought to remain protected by their parents.

Everyone knew that.

Still, the fact she was here, unguarded, worked in his favor. “Tell me where to find your parents.”

Her lips firmed, a mulish expression settling over her features. “Why would you want to know?”

“I will ask the questions and ye will answer without argument.”

Her gaze dropped for a moment, then she lifted a shoulder. “They live in America so I can’t imagine their names would mean anything to you.”

“Their names.”

“Fred and Ginger Rogers. Um... I mean Stuart.”

“Tis obvious yer lyin’ to me, lass. And I dinnae care for liars, not at all.”

Whatever she saw in his expression had her shrinking back. “I won’t tell you their names. You can ask me forever, but I won’t say a word.”

He wanted to be irritated, but couldn’t help admire her loyalty. “What does your father do for work?”

She looked wary for a moment, and then shrugged again. She started to unpick the bindings around her ankles. “Dad is in local politics. It’s a good fit for him, and mom’s a schoolteacher.”

“I hate office-bearers.”

She didn’t respond.

“Rogues and ne’er-do-wells the lot of them. I suppose he’s easy to look upon?”

Her brows furrowed. “Are you asking if he’s good-looking? I guess so, for a man his age, anyway.”

Gareth’s mouth tightened. “Doaty bampots, and wastrels the lot of them.”

Her chin lifted. “It’s actually a good fit for Dad. He really cares about people. And somebody has to do the job.”

He considered her stubborn expression. “Aye, nevertheless, a tutor is a good profession for a woman. Perhaps such an honorable wife would keep him in line.”

“I’m so glad you approve.” She said the words mildly, but he could sense the underlying sarcasm. He let it go. “Why did your parents let you come here alone?”

“I haven’t lived at home for a long time. I work for a Hollywood movie producer in California. I’m here on assignment.”

“What do you do for this man?”

“I research history, I take pictures, I let him know what people used to wear, some of the words they would use, how they lived, things like that. I also research the politics of the time.”

He scowled at her. “For what purpose would your employer need such information?”

“I told you. He makes movies.”

He didn't want her to think him unschooled, not with her mother a tutor, so he nodded. "I have seen movies before. Some of the guards watch them at night on their little devices."

"Guards?" Her brow arched. "You have guards where you live?"

He scowled. "I've said I will ask the questions."

"Sorry. May I at least ask what your favorite movies are?"

"John Wayne is a favorite among most of us."

She smiled. "Everyone likes the Duke."

He nodded. "Just so. About your parents—"

"You're like a dog with a bone. I'm not going to introduce you to my parents, and no I don't live with them, and no I won't tell you their names."

"What is your village called?"

"Um... Hollywood."

"And are your family nearby?"

"No. They live hundreds of miles away, and you'll never find them. I live with my best friend."

"Another girl?"

She nodded, and the bindings on her feet came loose.

He couldn't help scowling again. "D'yer neighbors watch out for you? Are you part of a clan?"

She laughed. "In Hollywood? That would be a no. In fact, I don't even really know any of my neighbors."

"How could you not know your neighbors?"

She shook her legs out in front of her. "None of us ever talk to each other. Most of them have small dogs they talk to instead. And most of them are actually pretty snobbish."

"Perhaps they know your father is in politics."

She rolled blue eyes, and her exasperation, her more relaxed attitude, appealed to him on a level he didn't understand. He only knew he found it hard to look away.

"It sounds a strange place. 'Tis for the best you've come here."

She stiffened again. "Why? So you can kill me?" Her words held a bravado he'd heard frequently on the battlefield, a mixture of fear and hard-won defiance.

He tried to reach for his anger again—his killing anger—but it wouldn't come. The thought of her protecting her parents, rather than the other way around, living with another young girl, surrounded by neighbors who would only speak to their dogs, saddened him. Mayhap she'd been punished by life enough.

"You have no man of your own? No prospect of children?" That, he could sympathize with.

"I'm sure I'll marry someday."

"But ye said you were twenty and six."

"So? What's your point? I'm not exactly dog meat."

He tried to hide his pity. How could she find such a man when she sat in a home surrounded by people who wouldn't speak to her.

"In the meantime, I'm considering getting a small dog of my own."

He shook his head. "'Tis just sad, lass."

"You don't care for pets?"

“Well, ye yerself remind me of a kitten. Mayhap I could come to appreciate such a pet.”

She scowled. “I’m no pet.”

Amusement tilted his lips. “My apologies, kitten. ’Tis just your wee claws come out unexpectedly, so the comparison is inevitable.”

“What do you want of me?”

His amusement faded away. What was he doing, sitting here and teasing the pretty lass? She was a Stuart, and he’d best not forget it.

His task to kill her seemed a reasonable undertaking yesterday, but ridiculous today. She was female and without family support. Stuart or no, she needed protection. She certainly wasn’t getting it from that reprehensible father of hers. Now, were he here, he’d no doubt deserve a knife in the gut.

So no, he couldn’t kill the lass.

How to get his revenge, then?

All of this, becoming mortal again, breathing again, becoming flesh and blood, had scrambled his brains.

What had the witch said? He had but a few days in which to complete a task. A noble deed. Killing a Stuart would be considered a noble deed, but if he couldn’t kill the girl, what was he to do?

His mind wasn’t clear. And until it was, until he could make decisions, one thing he did know for sure. He wasn’t ready to let go of the girl.

“What do I want of ye?”

She nodded.

“Why, I want to keep you, lass. Until such time as I’m pleased to let you go.”

Chapter 4

Lissa rolled over, shot to her feet, and lurched away. The prickling sensation had eased, but her legs weren’t quite in working order.

He easily caught her, and when she hit out at him, grasped her hands and seemed amused by her efforts. “Would ye care for some food? ’Tis time to break your fast, and you must be hungry by now.”

Breakfast? Didn’t he realize they were fighting? She was anyway, and maybe for her life. She wrenched a hand away, fisted it, and hit his chest with the side.

He laughed.

And why not? It was pretty much a girly hit. She wilted, letting him hold up her weight. “Just tell me what you want.”

Not visibly fazed, he seemed to think about it for a moment. “A good question. I’ve a good deed to perform, but I’d prefer to find my kin first. I want to go to Inverdeem and see who’s still there, see who’s still left.”

“If you want to do a good deed just let me go!”

His grip tightened on her arms. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be so quick to show leniency toward ye.”

She swallowed and stood up straight. “So... you haven’t been home in a while?”

“Nae, but I’ve a mind to see what happened to my sister. I want to know if she married, if she had children, if there is anyone left of our blood. I want to know what happened to my parents. How they lived and died. I want these questions answered.”

He hadn’t seen his family. He’d mentioned guards earlier. At times he seemed insane. “Have you been locked away somewhere?”

He chuckled, but it seemed humorless. “Aye, lass. You could say that.”

“And your family didn’t visit you?”

“In the early days they came a few times, but they’ve been gone a long while now.”

Compassion she didn’t want to feel rushed through her. “How long were you imprisoned?”

“It’s been 270 years now.”

“Oh. Well, then.” She didn’t know what to say to that. His gaze was clear, unmarked by insanity, but lunacy was the only thing that made sense. “Tell me your name. Who are you?” Perhaps she could look him up on the Internet and find out where he came from. Surely someone was missing him. A warden, perhaps?

“I am Gareth Alexander Sutherland McGregor. I was born in the year 1720. My parents are Mary Alice Sutherland MacGregor, and John Gareth Michael McGregor. I worked for the French army, and by Culloden served under Lord Murray and fought with the Glengarry regiment. To my everlastin’ shame, I talked my brothers into joinin’ me in takin’ up the Jacobite cause to place The Young Pretender upon the throne.”

Chills ran up her back. She’d seen enough of the movie the day before to understand the gist of what he was talking about. She nodded. “Go on.”

“Charles Stuart betrayed us all. The man was a coward and a cheat. Along with myself, my brothers and my comrades all paid the price for his cowardice and ineptitude.”

Just to be sure they were on the same page, she asked, “At Culloden Moor?”

“Aye.” He seemed pleased by her understanding. “We were slaughtered in 1745, and ever since we have lived in a state of otherness, fading in and out, neither alive nor truly dead and gone.”

“Ah.” That sealed it then. He resided in a psychiatric institution, and he’d obviously escaped. He was out terrorizing tourists and needed to be captured and reinstated in his ward.

That’s what her brain told her anyway.

But she’d seen him yesterday, hadn’t she? What were the chances Culloden Moor’s visitors center had an elaborate hologram that chased people back to the parking lot?

Still, what were the chances an enraged highland ghost had overheard her bragging she was a Stuart and tried to kill her?

She rubbed her forehead, glanced around and tried to ground herself in reality. There was no way this man had been born close to 300 years ago. That was obviously impossible. But she had to ask. “You were the ghost yesterday at Culloden Moor?”

“Aye.”

“Did you see me there?”

“Aye. I tried to strike ye down with my claymore.”

Chills lifted the hair at her neck.

“And now you’re no longer a ghost?”

He held out his arms. “Flesh and blood.”

“Why aren’t you a ghost anymore?”

“I’ll not expect ye to believe,” he looked down, as if embarrassed. “It was a young witchling. She’s given us a second chance, hasn’t she?”

“So, a witch brought you back to life. A teenage witch?”

“That’s what I’m sayin’.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I understand if you dinnae believe. I’d not believe either, if I’d not experienced it firsthand.”

“Why hang about Culloden Moor? Why haven’t you moved on?” She tried to sound reasonable.

He shrugged. “I’ve considered it over the years, of course, and ’tis my belief we got stuck.”

“Why’s that?”

He took a step back. “I’ll not stand here and answer all your questions.” He sounded on the verge of anger once more.

She sighed. Even if the memory of the ghostly apparition from the day before caused her to doubt all rational beliefs, where did they go from here? “Tell me what you want. Are you going to kill me?”

He rubbed the back of his neck again. “Nae. I’ve decided not to.”

She took a breath, and released it slowly. “What do you want, then?”

“I dinnae know.”

He seemed lost and afraid and she could feel her heart softening. Not a good idea. How many actors had tried to get into her good graces, telling her sob stories, hoping she’d intervene on their behalf with the higher ups? She was trying to learn to steel herself against exactly this kind of manipulation.

In fact, could this man be a Hollywood actor determined to land a part in the movie she was researching? She wouldn’t put it past any of their ilk. “Would you mind if I left?”

He scowled. “I’m not ready to see you go. I’ve still questions.”

She folded her arms in front of her. “Can I finish answering your questions and then be on my way?”

“Nae. I’ll not have ye leavin’ me.”

She could see the man was in pain, angry, and perhaps in need of medication. Still, her heart was touched. “I could stay with you for a while. Is there anywhere you’d care to go?”

Angry and confused, his vivid gray eyes searched her face. Tanned skin and broad cheekbones highlighted a strong, masculine beauty, and braids held black hair out of the way. “I want to go home, lass. Can you help me get home?”

She felt herself softening further. “Are you going to hurt me?”

“Nae, lass. Stuart or no, I told ye I decided not to.”

“Thank you.”

His lips tilted in a smile. “So, we’re to be friends, then?”

She wondered if she had Stockholm syndrome? Could you get that after one night? Apparently so. Regardless, she did feel everyone was entitled to a second

chance. She'd received one once, hadn't she? And she'd been able to turn her entire life around because of it.

Her kidnapping, while she still didn't understand it, hadn't hurt her. It scared her, but she was unharmed. Was she willing to see the man behind bars for the rest of his life for an ill thought out kidnapping when he was so obviously under stress?

The answer was no.

"What's it to be, wee kitten? Will ye help me?"

She looked at him for a long moment, and he shifted from one foot to the next. He seemed to be anxious, holding his breath.

She was going to be an idiot, wasn't she?

She slowly nodded. "Yes. Yes, I will."

After walking a couple of hours, they stopped in a small town so Lissa could purchase some clothing. Gareth wouldn't risk returning for her things and insisted they press forward. She insisted she wasn't wearing her night clothes for the rest of their time together, and though he was anxious to move on to Inverness, he'd been curious about the place as well. The town had not been there the last he'd walked this way.

Lissa had declared the place generic, and claimed it was similar to eastern towns in America. She'd been disappointed by its lack of Scottish charm, as she called it.

For Gareth, there'd been plenty to see. None of the buildings, trees, or people looked familiar to him. The cars were the worst, speeding past, frightening the wits out of innocent bystanders.

How could so much have changed?

He'd worried about trusting her and resorted to threats once again. "I dinnae want to hurt anyone, but I will." He'd insisted.

She'd been furious. "I've said I'll help, so stop with the bullying already!"

He nodded, but stayed close just the same.

Now they'd finally hit Inverness and he felt hollow and muddled as they traipsed through the crowded city.

"This place is gorgeous!" Lissa gazed about in awe. "And look at the street. Cobblestones! There are certain things Europe has in spades that we don't have in America."

"Ye've not any roads?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course we do, but not like these. And we don't have anything similar to this." She gestured at the tall, colorful buildings. "We have cathedrals, but nothing like the ones you have here in Europe. The architecture is so different from what I'm used to. The last place reminded me of where I'm from. Do you see the difference? Here it's all arches, tall buildings, steeples, and cobblestones. And we have cities rather than villages. Plus, we don't have castles."

He shifted around a couple shopping at a stall. "No castles?"

"No. Plus, you have structures dating back to the prehistoric era, Roman times, middle ages, the Renaissance, and beyond. I did some research to get started, but there's so much to see, I really don't know where to go first."

"We go to Inverdeem."

She laughed and her good mood was contagious, her enthusiasm attractive, marking her somehow even prettier than before. "Inverdeem is as good a place to start as any."

"All right, lass." Gareth glanced around a bit uneasily. He didn't care for the crowds, and though some of the buildings were similar to those in his time, most things looked different to him. Especially the size of the city. He hoped the changes in his village were less dramatic.

Earlier they'd finished off the food he'd stolen the night before, and he was hungry again. He could smell meat roasting and glanced about to see if he could spot the source.

He walked over to a vendor roasting chicken, and Lissa followed. "Do you want to get something to eat?"

He nodded, but the sudden realization he had no coin bothered him.

She set her pack down, retrieved a small purse, and pulled out a card. He'd seen them before at the visitors center and wondered at their use. "This is for payment?"

"The money is in the bank and this credit card allows me to use it."

"Tis yer hard earned coin?"

She glanced up and seemed to read his concern. "Don't worry. My boss pays for all my food and lodging. If we don't eat at fancy restaurants, there's plenty for the both of us."

He nodded, relieved the coin wasn't coming directly from her.

As she ordered their meal, he looked around with interest. He wandered a few feet away to watch the cook throw spiced meat over hot iron bars and fry up what looked to be potatoes.

"Gareth! Help!"

Gareth rounded, his dagger in hand.

Lissa glanced frantically around. "My pack! He stole it!" She pointed in the direction of a young man moving fast. "Please, you have to stop him! He has my laptop and my camera and everything I need."

"Ye'll stay here?"

Her eyes were filled with tears now. "Yes! Please, catch him."

It was a relief to have a task to accomplish. There was much he didn't know about this time period, but he knew how to deal with a thief.

"Give me yer word ye'll not leave."

"I give you my word. I'll be right here when you get back. Please, hurry!"

He took off after the thief. The young man was fast, glancing over his shoulder occasionally, but Gareth was faster. He'd spent his entire life on his legs and was fast and strong. Not only that, but Gareth was happy to have a goal. It had been a long time since he'd been able to fight a villain. He would not let Lissa down.

The thief ran down a side street, but Gareth ran after him, gaining fast. The young man turned a corner, jumped on a fence, and started to climb while casting a look of fear behind him.

Dagger in hand, Gareth was almost upon the young man when the thief squealed, ditched the pack, and scrambled over the fence.

Gareth, heart racing, was almost unwilling to give up the chase, but realized someone else could come pick up the pack, and he'd lose it. Lissa wouldn't be impressed by the fact he'd pounded the lad's face a bit if her pack went missing.

With a resigned sigh, he gave up the chase, and watched his prey run off.

He didn't have to like it.

He picked up the pack and slung it over one shoulder. "I'll not forget yer face!" He yelled after the young man.

He hurried back to find Lissa waiting at an outside table, food laid out, wringing her hands. She saw him coming and rushed forward. "Are you all right? Did he hurt you?" She petted his arm.

Pleasure and indignation fought to rule. It was nice that she worried, but truly? "Ye're not serious, lass?"

She looked slightly abashed. "He could have had a knife or something."

Gareth chuckled. "I should be so fortunate. He ditched the pack, forcin' me to give up the chase."

"What would you have done if you'd caught him?"

"Simply taught the lad some manners." He sat and looked at the food on the table. "Shall we?"

"Go ahead." Lissa opened the pack and searched inside. She let out a breath. "Thank goodness, it's all here. I can't thank you enough. You were amazing."

Pleasure flooded him and heat rose in his cheeks. He reached for some chicken. "Think naught on it, I'll keep ye safe while yer with me."

"And how long might that be?"

"I've been thinkin' on that as we walked. 'Tis obvious I won't be able to kill ye even though ye carry tainted blood."

She lifted a brow. "That's good."

He looked at her bent head suspiciously. Was she laughing at him? "That does not mean ye dinnae owe me."

"How do you figure?"

"I'm not takin' yer life, am I? And I retrieved somethin' precious to ye, did I not?"

"You did." They ate in silence for a moment.

"I want ye to agree to help me of yer own free will. I want yer word ye'll not run off."

"You know what? Fine. I'm used to it anyway. Every man I've ever been around has wanted something from me. So don't worry about it, I'm used to being used."

Gareth scowled. "Did yer father not protect yer virtue? Yer brothers?"

She rolled her eyes. "I don't have any brothers. And men didn't want *that* from me."

He ran his gaze over what he could see of her, sitting as she was, pretty as a picture, her curves obvious in the tight shirt. "Of course they did."

She blushed. "Be that as it may, tell me what, exactly, you want from me?"

He dropped his gaze to his food so as not to stare at her. "I seem to be headin' home. I'd like yer word ye'll help me complete this task. I dinnae wish to worry every second that ye'll run."

"Look, I'll be glad to help you find your sister." She hesitated. "Or, if she's not around, her descendants. Either way, I'll do whatever I'm able. There will be

church records, and I'm actually quite good at this sort of thing." She held out her hand. "So, yes. You have my word."

He took her slight hand in his and ran his thumb over the back of it, enjoying the softness and the feel of her skin. "So ye're to be my servant? If only for a short while?"

It was her turn to scowl and his to laugh.

Chapter 5

They walked out of town and down the road again.

"Are you sure you don't want to get a rental car?" Lissa asked.

"I enjoy the road. It's been a long while since I've been able to walk it."

He realized he was a bit leery about reaching Inverdeem. As much as Inverness had changed, he wondered what his own village would look like. He feared what he'd find there. If they walked the entire way, that was all right by him.

Besides, he enjoyed the feel of Scotland under his feet once more. Enjoyed the connection, the air in his lungs, the sun on his skin.

He glanced at the girl. He appreciated the company as well. "Ye've been a good sport."

"And you saved my backpack."

He gripped the strap over his shoulder and smiled. It was a small thing, but it made him happy to have done such for her. Perhaps the witch would consider it his good deed? He doubted it. It was but a small thing. If he'd been able to thrash the thief, then mayhap she'd accept it as such. He wished he'd had the chance. A good fight might be just what he needed to set his world straight again. "Twas naught."

"It might have been nothing to you, but it meant the world to me."

Again, he felt his chest puffing. The girl made him feel good, and he was glad of her companionship. If he accomplished his good deed too soon, Soni might come for him. He wasn't ready to go yet.

He gestured to the fields on either side of the road. "Much has changed, but it makes me glad to see some things stayed the same."

She looked out at the rolling fields. "Scotland is beautiful."

"Aye, lass. There's no place like it in the world."

"Have you been many places?"

"France, Rome, Italy. England, of course. Though the circumstances weren't what ye'd call pleasurable."

"Have you ever been to America?"

"No. Though, I understand many from Scotland went there after Culloden Moor. Chased there by the English. From what I've seen and heard, it wasnae a good time."

Her eyes narrowed as, once again, she visibly struggled to accept he'd been born centuries earlier.

"What say ye, lass, ye'll not believe I'm a ghost come back to life to haunt ye?"

She looked at him and said darkly, "Oh, I believe you're here to haunt me, all right."

He laughed aloud. As confused as the girl was, she was good company. He could feel her softening toward him, as he was to her.

If he could simply forget who begat her, he'd find their time together pleasant, indeed.

Not only that, but he found himself feeling possessive of the girl. He enjoyed sheltering her, protecting her, and carrying her pack. He hoped for another opportunity to champion her so as to see the adoring way she gazed at him. He knew he should not care for such, but could not will himself to stop.

On the other hand, perhaps he should be feeling such. She was his prisoner, and no matter what she said, for the moment, his servant. She was to do him a good turn, and in response, he'd spare her life.

A fine arrangement, that.

And it handily explained his feelings.

He *should* feel camaraderie toward his servant.

That, he could live with.

Lissa wiped the fog from the mirror and studied her face. She couldn't believe she was sharing a bed and breakfast with a madman. They'd walked for most of the day, Gareth trying his best to stay away from the general populace. At first she'd thought he was afraid she'd run away, but the longer they walked, the more he seemed to enjoy it. So maybe he was just the outdoors type.

He'd even planned to sleep outside again, but she'd insisted they pick a bed and breakfast. She'd claimed she needed Wi-Fi, which she did, of course, but she needed a shower and bed more.

After spending a day in his company, spending the night in his arms wasn't something she wanted to try again.

Perhaps she was afraid she'd like it too much.

She checked that the complimentary robe covered her completely, that the towel wrapped around her head was tight, then opened the door, and stepped out of the bathroom.

Gareth sat on the plush chair in the corner. "Are ye done, lass? Is it my turn?"

"It's all yours."

He'd already removed his boots. "I've never had a shower before, unless ye count the rain. I'm lookin' forward to it."

"Oh, you'll like it." She pulled out Cara's Highlander novel, climbed into bed, and got under the covers. She needed a distraction, a reason for him to stop talking to her, and a pretext to look away.

"What are ye readin', lass?"

"Just a story."

"Can I see the book?"

She hesitated, then reluctantly handed it over. If she didn't let him see it, if she acted as if it was a big deal, he'd hound her until she gave it to him.

He studied the dark, bare-chested figure on the cover, the kilt and tartan . "Won't ye read me some of it?"

"You'd probably rather watch TV."

He looked amused as he handed her back the book. "So, ye like Scottish men?"

She took her book and ignored him as she opened it again. When he drew a breath and went to speak again, she sighed. "It's called fantasy." She gave Gareth a pointed look, "With the lack of attractive men in my life, I can at least enjoy a pretend romance. Can't I?"

He looked offended. "Ye dinnae find me attractive? At one time women did."

"You're too angry." She turned the page.

He scowled at that. "What has anger to do with my looks?"

"Are you kidding? Everything. Men never understand, but a pleasant demeanor has everything to do with your looks."

He still scowled...

"You're making my point exactly. Go look in the mirror, and you'll see what I mean."

His expression relaxed, and he grinned. He looked at the book again and padded back and forth in front of the bed. She bit her lip. Was he trying to capture her attention?

"So, modern women like a fantasy man?"

She turned the page. "Why don't you go find some modern women and ask them?"

"I'm askin' ye, lass."

She sighed. "What we like is the romance, the happily ever after. Something men rarely know anything about."

There was a long pause. "I had a girl once, ye know."

That made her put the book down. "Really? You mean like a girlfriend?"

"Aye. She was to wait for me while I fought for the French."

"And did she wait?"

"I suppose she got tired of pining. She found someone else, married, and had children. I suppose I made her wait too long, didn't I?"

Whether he realized it or not, she heard the underlying regret in his voice "I'm sorry. That's too bad."

He shrugged as if it didn't matter, but she could tell it did.

The silence became awkward, and after a moment, Lissa blurted out, "I've been there too, you know. I've had a few bad relationships I hoped would work out. I happen to know some very powerful men, and I've had several attractive guys try to use me to get to them."

Gareth looked at her like she was crazy. "They used ye to get to other men?"

She shrugged.

He continued to stare.

Her cheeks heated. Why had she said anything? She should have kept her mouth shut. Now he studied her as if she was some sort of freak. "What are you doing? Looking for flaws?"

He slowly shook his head. "There are no flaws to be found. Ye're simply beautiful, lass."

She released a breath. What was she supposed to say to that?

"'Tis wondrous, Lissa!" Gareth called from the bathroom. "Ye should join me!"

"I'm good," she murmured under her breath.

Was it too much to ask he shut the door? He claimed he was afraid she'd run off, but she'd started to think he was simply an exhibitionist. The fact she was tempted to peek was maddening, but fortunately, a bright pink shower curtain blocked any kind of view. All she could see was the top of his head.

Propped against pillows, she leaned against the headboard, legs outstretched, computer on her lap. She'd given up on the novel and tried to find information on his sister, Tavia MacGregor, but so far, nothing.

"This soap smells of lavender! 'Tis foamy, and there's much of it!"

She couldn't help but smile. "I'm glad you're enjoying your shower," she called out. He'd gone into raptures over the toothbrush and toothpaste, as well.

He groaned. "The suds are amazin'!"

Was he soaping his hair for the third time? Was she peeking again? If it really was his first shower, she couldn't begrudge him. Let him enjoy.

He groaned again. The man should feature in a commercial.

They were still getting used to each other. He swung between trusting her and not. He appeared slightly unhinged at times, and then he'd amuse her. Like now. She'd probably like him better if he didn't remind her periodically she was his servant. It'd be nice if he asked for help instead of demanding it.

"The water's startin' to cool." He sounded disgruntled.

"And here I thought you primitive types liked to sleep outdoors and take cold showers." She purred the words, confident he couldn't hear.

"'Tis gettin' even colder!" Indignation threaded his voice.

She chuckled quietly.

"Will it warm again?"

"It'll probably take at least an hour," she called.

He growled in disgust and fumbled with the knobs until he turned the water off. "'Twas wondrous."

"I could tell you enjoyed it."

"When will the food arrive?"

She chuckled. "In a few." The intimacy of the situation wasn't lost on her. She should feel more uncomfortable and probably shouldn't be enjoying this so much.

He slid the shower curtain aside and she quickly ducked her head. He half closed the door, but continued to rhapsodize about the wonderful soap, the hot water, and how he could get used to it. When he finally exited the bathroom, barefoot, he'd braided his hair on both sides and dressed again in his black and red kilt and plaid, his belt firmly tucked around his waist.

She exhaled.

He bounced down on the bed. "What have ye been doing?"

"Don't get too comfortable. Ye're on the couch tonight, remember? And I'm searching for information on your sister." A clean, sweet-smelling Gareth heightened his attraction so she didn't look at him. Did he know how he affected her? She suspected so.

"Any luck?"

"I'm not sure. I did find something. It may be a reference to your sister. I'll know more when we reach the church. Can I have my phone? I need to call my boss. I don't want to get fired."

He frowned. "Ye work for me now."

"Not permanently. Eventually, I'll go back to work for the man who actually pays me."

"I'm here but a couple more days. Mayhap less. Ye can put him off until then."

"Oh, can I now?"

He glowered. "Blood will tell. Ye need to make the honorable choice here. I've no doubt yer father acts much the same, makin' and breakin' promises."

"*That's it.*" Setting the computer aside, she stood beside the bed and pointed her finger. "You know what? I'm actually proud of my heritage, of my family, and especially my father, so bite me!"

He stood as well, his sizable male body making the room suddenly smaller, but she refused to act intimidated.

"And I'll tell you what else, I have no doubt everyone in the world has relatives they're ashamed of and that includes you!"

A storm arrived on Gareth's face and he tossed her phone on the bed. "Ye're proud of yer relationship to Charles Stuart? The man was naught but a cowardly, dimwitted, layabout! A drunk and a fool. He did naught to honor his family name when he lived."

Her hands shot to her hips and her chin jerked forward. "Blah, blah, blah. I've never met the man in my life, so I don't care about him, do I?"

"It seems ye do. Ye bring him up often enough, do ye not? Go about braggin' of him."

She pointed again. "You're the one who brings him up all the time. Perhaps he was so bonny you had a fondness for the man? Charmed you, did he? Then let you down?"

They were both glaring when a knock sounded on the door.

Gareth crossed the room to answer. He smiled, his bad mood dissipating as a middle-aged woman slid into the room balancing a tray.

"Oh, this looks good." Gareth studied the meal. "Did ye make it yerself?"

"Aye, I did."

"Weel, it looks delicious, the best I've seen. I cannae wait to taste it!"

Oh, now he charmed, did he? As she watched him smile and banter with the landlady, watched her giggle, she wondered if she'd be able to resist that sort of charm.

She plucked her phone off the bed and plugged it in. When she turned it on, she saw Perry had called.

Tittering, the lady of the house retreated.

"What are ye doin'?"

"Calling my boss."

At his reluctant nod, she dialed Perry's number.

"Where have you been? I've been trying to get hold of you!" Perry's gruff voice sounded irritated.

"I'm sorry. I've been doing research. Historical research," she stressed. That was true enough, she was studying a Neanderthal, wasn't she? Hopefully some of the research she did for Gareth would work for her boss as well.

"I don't like it when you disappear like that!" Perry shouted, and she flinched. She could just see him grabbing the hair at the back of his head the way he did. "I need to know what you're doing. What have you got for me?"

Gareth snatched the phone. "Who's there?"

She could hear Perry asking the same on the other end.

"I dinnae care for the way ye talk to Mistress Stuart. I'll not stand by and listen to ye bellowin' at a female. Where are yer manners, man?"

Lissa fought to get the phone, but he easily held her off. When he finally relinquished it, she tried to apologize. "Perry, I'm sorry."

"Who was that?" He sounded subdued.

"A contact. A man helping with research."

"All right, keep me informed. When you can."

She disconnected and looked at the phone. Perry backing down? He considered it his right to be loud, obnoxious and demanding. Most pandered to his vanity.

She turned to Gareth. "Why did you do that?"

"No man will use that tone of voice with ye while I'm here."

"You use it all the time."

"No other man. I dinnae care for his tone."

"You've been snapping at me for twenty-four hours. Threatening to kill me!"

"Ye belong to me for the next two days, and ye'll be safe in my care."

She threw up her hands. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't ruin my career in the meantime. Anyway, what do you mean by two days?"

He lifted a shoulder. "When my time's up, I'll be gone."

At that, her stomach hollowed. "Why? Where will you go?"

"As to that, I'm not sure. Heaven? Hell? The witch didnae say."

"You're going to die again?" Lissa had a hard time catching her breath.

"I expect so, lass. Death holds no mystery for me. So what say ye dinnae make the few days I have miserable. Just do as I say, and we'll get along fine."

"Mm hmm." She snorted and reached for her computer. "Whatever you say. I'm sure that's exactly what's going to happen."

After a long hesitation, he asked, "Bite ye where, exactly, lass?"

She laughed.

Chapter 6

Lissa woke the next morning with a start and the ghostly apparitions faded away.

A *nightmare*. No surprise there as she'd been awake most of the night tossing and turning. Wait. Why had she been awake most of the night?

It took her a moment to remember where she was. *Scotland*.

She sat up and looked over at the couch. She could see where Gareth had slept, his pillow still on one end and a blanket neatly folded beside it. He wasn't in the bathroom either, and she finally realized he wasn't in the room at all. The guy *was* a ghost. Maybe he'd simply disappeared?

This was the first he'd left her alone. This was her chance to run away, wasn't it? Or, there was a pad of paper on the nightstand with the address of the hotel. She could simply call the police and wait for rescue. She didn't owe the man anything, did she?

Finally, she threw herself back against the pillows. Who was she fooling? She wasn't going to do anything. She'd given her word and planned to help.

Unless he really had disappeared.

Sometimes she didn't even understand herself. There was something very compelling about him, and sleeping in his arms the night before last had probably scrambled her brains.

Before she had a chance to think further, the door opened, and Gareth, looking triumphant, came in carrying a tray with food and drinks. "I quite like the lady of the house. She's verra accommodatin'."

A spurt of happiness rose within her. Oh good grief, she did have Stockholm syndrome, didn't she?

Gareth eyed her appraisingly. "Ye know, lass, ye make a lovely picture this morn'." He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

And did she flinch? No. Did she run screaming for her life? No. Did she enjoy it? Yes. Case closed. A major case of Stockholm. She didn't want to get away. She was attracted to the guy. "You're in a good mood this morning. What happened? Did you find someone to fight with? Did you slay a few enemies? Have a pint with your ghost friends."

"Ye've a smart mouth on ye in the morn'."

While she'd lay awake for half the night, he'd drifted off to sleep immediately.

She actually wanted to believe his story. That he was a ghost from the Highlands, that he was exactly the kind of man she liked to read about in romance novels. He was probably trying to make a fool of her, and he certainly didn't have to try very hard.

Her father would say she was a dreamer. Her no-nonsense mother would think her gullible.

There was a tap at the door. When Gareth opened it, the landlady giggled, and brought in a tray of food. "A big man like ye needs a proper breakfast in the mornin'. I thought ye might enjoy these fresh-baked cinnamon rolls."

Gareth grinned. "If they were made by ye, I've no doubt they'll be the best I've ever tasted."

Flatterer. Lissa managed to keep from rolling her eyes.

The woman giggled again. "Oh, get on with ye. Ye've a devil's tongue and that is God's honest truth."

She set the tray down on the dresser and glanced at Lissa. "Nothin' quite like a holiday romance, is there love?" She giggled again. "Our Scottish lads are difficult to resist."

"Now, where are ye from again Gareth? I love how thick yer brogue is."

As they discussed the area, Lissa had the realization that if she didn't accuse Gareth of keeping her here against her wishes, she wouldn't be able to say a word about it later. No one would believe her.

After the landlady left, Lissa asked, "Are you excited to find out about your sister? To see if you have any relatives left in the area?"

“Aye. I’ll admit yesterday I was afeared of what I might find, but today’s a new day, and I’m anxious to get there.”

“You do realize after all these years, there might not be anyone left to find?”

“But there might be.”

“We’ll look in the church records, but be prepared for the worst. You don’t want to be disappointed if it leads to a dead-end.”

He sighed. “I’ve had enough of disappointment over the years. Just for today, can we hope for the best? If only for a while?”

That just about broke her heart.

If she took him completely at face value, he’d been through a lot. He’d lived in a difficult time full of conflict and war—and died young. He’d been a ghost for 270 years. And now a witch had control of his future.

He only planned to keep Lissa with him for a couple more days at most. Because the witch was going to take him back.

Did she really believe any of this?

She shook off her doubts. If he ended up making a fool out of her, then so what? That was on him, not her. She’d treat this like a fantasy trip. She was in Scotland, on an adventure, with a gorgeous man.

If she protected her heart, she could still come out of this with some good stories to tell, and maybe some great memories.

She was going to let go of doubt and seize this opportunity.

Surely she could find some good news to tell him? She could focus on the positive, right?

She smiled at him. “Okay. Let’s hope for the best.”

Gareth watched as Lissa quickly packed her things, and called to the front desk to inquire about rental cars. She’d insisted she’d not walk again this day.

She was a vulnerable little thing. He wished he could help her with that, but he couldn’t stay. Perhaps he could toughen her up a bit before he went, teach her to stop people from taking advantage of her. He’d been taken advantage of in the worst way possible. He’d forfeited his life and his brothers’ lives to a fool. He vowed never to let such happen again. Especially to those in his care.

And she was in his care.

Was he starting to feel for her? Mayhap. But he was leaving, so there was naught to do about it.

He didn’t deny he felt protective of her. It wasn’t something he’d planned on, but it seemed to be something he couldn’t help. Because she was a woman? Because she’d agreed to help him?

He did have something to offer in return. He could help her to stand tall, to intimidate, to look unlike a victim. Then others wouldn’t think to steal from her, use her, or bruise her tender feelings.

He was glad he’d not killed her, and his heart clenched at the thought of the spirited beauty slain—and by his hand. What had he been thinking? After all, she wasn’t The Young Pretender, and by all observances, the man’s blood had been completely diluted.

Didn't the witch promise him a chance at Charles Stuart himself if Gareth did a good deed?

Did that chance still hold, since he'd cheated to get here? He couldn't say he regretted it, but in case this was all the joy left to him, he planned to appreciate the time he had left.

He picked up her bag, she tried to take it from him, but he shook his head. "I'll carry it again, lass. Let's go."

He held out his hand, and was gratified when she took it. Her hand was warm, small, and trusting in his. He couldn't remember the last time he'd held a girl's hand, and as her fingers tightened around his, his heart seemed to warm and expand.

They walked to the next village to rent a car, and as they started up the road, Gareth took hold of her hand once more.

Lissa enjoyed the connection and felt her cheeks warm. "So tell me about your family."

"Why would ye want to know?"

She lifted a shoulder. "Perry's going to want a report on what kind of historical research I'm getting done. Though you were born during the Age of Enlightenment, I don't personally know anyone more medieval than you. No offense."

He shot her a wry glance. "None taken, I assure ye."

"I just want to pick your brain while I have the chance."

He smiled at that. "Well, I'm the oldest, and then there are my two brothers and my sister."

"What did your dad do for work?"

"He brewed the best ale in the country."

"So, you like to drink?"

He shot her a look. "I'm Scottish lass, what do ye think? Of course I do."

"What was your mom like?"

At the question, he looked slightly melancholy. He lifted a shoulder. "In her youth, she was purported to be a beauty. My father liked to brag he'd married her young and trained her up. But the truth was that my mother ruled our household."

"I can tell you miss them."

"Aye, I do. My sister was still quite young when I went off to fight. She was a bonny little thing, bright and happy. We all doted on her."

"I do hope she married and had children."

He nodded. "I hope so, too. I hope some of our blood survived."

She glanced at him, gaging his mood. "One of these days, I plan to look into my family history too. I'm not truly sure if I was related to Bonnie Prince Charlie, but what was he like?"

Gareth's brows contracted. "Are ye proud of yer history? Are ye proud to be related to a murderer, a fool, and a blackguard?"

Her jaw jutted out. "I'm not even sure if it's true, but as I'm a researcher, I intend to find out one of these days. Perhaps on this trip."

"Answer the question. Are ye proud?"

“Okay, I’ll admit it. The thought we are related to him has always been sort of wonderful. My father loved the thought of it, and perhaps he passed those feelings onto me.”

He wrenched his hand from hers. “Ye admit this?”

Lissa threw up her arm. “Look, I’m sorry to upset you. But am I going around disparaging your relatives? I’m not doing that to you am I?”

“Let me tell ye of yer blood.”

They faced each other and she crossed her arms. “I’m not going to want to hear this, am I?”

“Ye just admitted ye did want to hear about it! So I’ll be the one to tell ye about him.”

“Well, maybe I do. But not from your point of view, obviously.”

“Nae, I insist on givin’ ye the truth of the matter. Charles Stuart was a scumbag and a fool.”

“Scumbag? Is that an 18th century description?”

“Nae, it’s not. But I’ve heard the word plenty of times at Culloden. Never was a more perfect word invented for such a man. He’s a coward, he’s treacherous, he’s a scoundrel with women, and he’s a murderin’ thief. He’s also a preening fool and is lazy. The fact ye have his blood runnin’ through yer veins isn’t so wondrous anymore, is it?”

“Well, thanks for that. If I read anything negative about any of your ancestors, I’ll be sure to pass along the information. Because you know what? Every single one of us has crappy relatives. Scumbags and layabouts. Criminals and thugs. None of us are exempt, but fortunately none of us are responsible for their actions either!”

She glared at him. “But you can be sure if I find someone in your family tree who was a total jerk, I’ll be sure to lay the blame directly at your feet.”

He glowered.

She glowered back. “What? No comment? Has everyone in your entire family been super awesome? Because I’m thinking not so much.”

He was studying her now. “I thought ye shy and withdrawn.” He said it like an accusation. “Afraid of yer own shadow. What happened?”

Lissa crossed her arms. “I don’t care for injustice.”

“Neither do I, lass.”

“My parents are awesome. My grandparents are some of the hardest workers I know. If Bonnie Prince Charlie was a cowardly, whiny little loser—”

“Not if! He was! He was also a drunkard and a fat old fool by the time he died.” Satisfaction permeated his voice.

Her brows crushed together. “I understood he was handsome. Wasn’t that why they called him Bonnie?”

That drew a satisfied smile out of Gareth. “He was considered such, until he became bitter, old, and whiny.” With a pleased smile, Gareth ran a hand down his own rock-hard stomach.

Why did he have to be so irritating? “You might get old and fat, too.”

He smirked. “Nae, lass. No such will ever happen to me. I’ll die, and likely go to the great beyond either today or tomorrow.”

She put a hand to her throat. “You really believe that, don’t you.”

“Tis true.”

She might be buying into it, too. If he only had a day or so left, why was she fighting with the man? “I just have one more point to make. My parents and grandparents are fabulous, hard-working people who love their family. So if we are related to the fat fool, I suppose we stamped out the loser blood a long time ago.”

He nodded once. “Well said, lass. ’Tis a good argument and one I agree with.” He held out his hand once more. “Come, I dinnae want to fight.”

Surprised by his agreement, she warily slid her hand into his. She didn’t want to fight either. What she wanted was to spend the day with him, impress him with her awesome research skills, and find his family. She just hoped he didn’t disappear in the meantime.

When they hit the next village they headed to the town center. Walking certainly gave Lissa a good appetite, and Gareth always seemed hungry, so they headed to get something to eat before renting the car. This time, Gareth wanted to try the fish and chips.

After standing in line, they retrieved their newspaper wrapped food, and Gareth spotted a local park. “Let’s head over that way so we can sit on the grass.”

That worked for Lissa. She might be the one purchasing their meals, and had even bought new clothing for the both of them, but she also quite enjoyed being coddled. Gareth had spent the day carrying her pack, as well as his new one. Directing her around rocks, taking her arm when he felt she needed extra help, and holding her hand—all left her feeling cherished.

She’d taken pictures of Scotland throughout the morning, and some of Gareth in his new jeans and tee-shirt. The man was gorgeous, and photos of him with Scotland as a backdrop—*breathhtaking*. She knew she’d be glad to have the pictures later.

She admitted her heart was softening toward Gareth, but also decided that was all right. A day or two, right? She was simply making a few memories to look back and smile on. As they walked to a likely spot on the grass, a young man stepped out from behind a tree.

“What’s new?” His smile was extremely unpleasant.

Lissa drew a breath and it felt as if her heart jumped to her throat. “Oh, my goodness, you scared me to death.”

“Did I now?”

It took her a second, but she finally recognized the boy. She swallowed, and was very glad Gareth was at her back. “You’re the boy who stole my backpack.”

The young man chuckled. “Aye, love, that’s just so. And I’ll be takin’ it once again, won’t I? When I saw ye stridin’ about me hometown, I couldnae believe my eyes. This is my lucky day, I said to meself.”

Lissa glanced at Gareth, saw his stormy expression, and glanced around at four other boys who surrounded them, faces menacing.

This was not going to end well.

“Here, Darlin’ hold this for me, will ye?” Gareth handed over their lunch.

She raised her free hand in a calming gesture, even as her heart stuttered in her chest. “Look. I’m a visitor to your country, and I don’t want any trouble.”

The young man stared at Gareth. “But ye’ve found it, haven’t ye?”

She glanced at Gareth again, this time to find him grinning. “Gareth, I don’t think —”

He shushed her. “’Tis all right, kitten, dinnae fash yerself.” To the young man he said, “One of us has found trouble, young laddie. And unlike the lass, I dinnae mind in the least.”

“Gareth, let’s go.” She glanced around, looking to see if there was anyone in the area who could help, but people were leaving the park in a hurry. “Please.”

She glanced at the backpack hanging from Gareth’s shoulder, and considered handing it over. She didn’t want to. It had everything in it. Her laptop, camera, wallet, and everything important. She glanced back at the young man. “I’ll give you fifty dollars if you let us pass.”

“Lissa,” Gareth chided gently. “I know ye’ve a backbone. Ye certainly stand up to me. But, lass, if villains come at ye and try and take possessions off ye, ye’re not to offer them money, ye offer them a fight. Are ye hearin’ me?”

Her spine straightened. “If you’re implying I’m a coward—”

“Nae, lass. Never that. I’m simply teachin’ ye for future reference. I’ll not have ye unprepared when I’m gone if those men ye work with try to use ye ill.”

“I’ll remember that in future. For now, I prefer prudence.” She sent a wary glance at the young ringleader. “Come on, let’s go around him.”

The young man drew a knife.

Lissa gasped.

The boy grinned. “Ye’re not leavin’ until yer man here hands over both packs or gets by us.”

Gareth pulled out his own knife. “Agreed. Five soft lads against a seasoned warrior?” He chuckled. “Let’s have at it, shall we?”

Gareth grabbed her, spun her around, and pressed her back against a tree. He dropped the packs at her feet and swung to protect her, hands partially extended, one holding a dagger, the other splayed for balance.

Her heart pounded as she reached out to touch his back. She couldn’t believe this was really happening. “Gareth, do you need my help?” Her voice trembled. “I don’t have a knife, but perhaps...” She looked around as if expecting a weapon to appear. She set their lunch down and picked up a rock with shaking fingers.

That made Gareth glance behind him and chuckle. “Brave lass. I thank ye for the offer, but I’d prefer if ye simply stood still.”

She’d prefer that, too. She backed up, but kept the rock in her hand.

The young men pulled out weapons, mostly knives, but one man had a short bat with metal tipping the edges. Another youth hit brass knuckles into his palm, and every time it smacked she flinched. If they tried to look intimidating, they succeeded. She glanced around hoping the police were on their way.

Gareth laughed again. “I must say, ’tis vastly entertainin’.”

Rage and ill-intent lighting their features, the young men converged.

Chapter 7

Gareth laughed as he jumped into the fight. This was exactly what he'd needed. As a ghost, he'd considered it a good idea to take out his revenge against the girl. But when faced with an actual woman for the first time in 270 years, a feminine beauty at that, it wasn't as clear-cut.

But one male against five? He liked those odds, indeed.

When the thief lurched at him, it was an easy matter to grab his arm and slice as he divested the boy of his knife.

The lad screamed and gripped his bleeding arm. He was on his knees by the time Gareth stabbed his knife into the leg of another and divested him of the metal about his knuckles. Handy that. He dropped it at his feet for further inspection and threw the knife into nearby bushes. He chuckled. "Come, lads." He jerked his chin and grinned. "Surely ye've more fight in ye than that!"

The two cursed him from the ground, one crawling away, the other scooting backward and out of knife's reach.

"Mayhap not."

Of the three still standing, one boy nervously shifted from foot to foot trying to work up his courage. After a glance shared between them, two others rushed forward.

On the upswing, he punched the bat wielder in the nose and felt and heard the crunch. Cool satisfaction rushed through him even as he chucked the lad's weapon in the bushes before the lad hit the ground. The other boy tried to shove a blade into Gareth's side. It must have been too dull to pierce skin, because all he felt was pressure and he laughed. "Ye shoulda brought a sharper knife."

He elbowed the young man in the throat and watched him fall, clasp his throat and gagging.

Gareth gestured the remaining boy forward. "Come now, ye'll not want yer friends to scorn ye later for a coward."

The boy, fear writ clearly on his face, must have agreed because though he looked fit to piss himself, he lifted his knife and, with a weak imitation of a warrior's cry, ran forward.

Gareth sighed at the lack of skill involved. He wrenched the boy's knife away and nicked his throat for being an irritant. The boy moaned and, gripping his bleeding throat, fell to his knees.

Gareth thought to toss the knife, but it looked like a good one, so he dropped it for further inspection. He lifted his knife again, but after a moment he exhaled loudly. "Not much of a fight then. What say ye, Lissa? Shall I let them live or finish them?"

That got them moving. They staggered up and stumbled away, leaning on each other and casting fearful, hate-filled glances behind them.

He heard Lissa catch her breath. Felt her hands on his back. "Are...are you all right?"

"I'm fine, lass. I wasnae touched."

"But... but you have a knife stuck in your side." He turned to see her hands wavering as if uncertain what to do.

"Ye're welcome to touch me. Truth to tell, I like it just fine. But I promise ye I'm unhurt."

Her eyes widened with fear. "Gareth, you're injured."

He glanced down to see a knife firmly planted in his side. "Blast it." He pulled it out.

Lissa gasped, and hurriedly pulled his shirt up. She gasped again.

Gareth twisted his neck to look. He ran his hands across his side. He didn't feel anything and found no blood.

Lissa's blue gaze slowly raised to his. "But... but..."

"What is it? It must have caught in my shirt. Lass, I'm unharmed."

She glanced at the knife still in his hand.

"See? 'Tis unbloodied."

"I... I saw your skin. When you pulled the knife out, your skin closed itself." She released him and took a step back. "I know what I saw. That first night, when I looked out my window, you were stumbling about. I thought you were the undead. A zombie."

"I am but a man, if only for a short while."

She still looked afraid.

Curious now, he took the blade and cut his thumb. As quickly as he sliced himself, the wound closed over and he didn't spill so much as a drop of blood.

They looked at each other, shocked.

He cut again, this time on his arm. The wound closed again. "It looks as if that witch forgot to tell me a few things."

"Like the fact you're not mortal?"

"It would seem so." Curiosity had him slicing deeper into his forearm.

Lissa moaned.

It was good his wound sealed fast so he could catch her before she hit the ground.

Lissa slowly woke to find herself in Gareth's arms. She didn't move or try to sit up. She just enjoyed his warm comfort for a moment. "What happened?"

Gareth grinned down at her. "It turns out ye've a weak stomach. Apparently, ye dinnae care for it when I tried to slice my arm in half."

Memory came back in a rush, and she sat up and faced him. "What are you?"

Gareth shrugged. "As to that, I suspect the wee witch left out a few details about the days I've been granted. Apparently I'm not to die or even get hurt while I'm here."

She stared at him. "You really are a ghost, aren't you?"

"I've not lied to ye, lass."

She took a deep breath and glanced around. "We need to get out of here before those boys return."

"I'm sure they'll come back for the weapons, eventually. But not for a while, and if they do, I suspect they'll turn around until we've left the place."

She took his hand. "I can't believe you took on five guys." She sounded admiring, even to herself, and she flushed.

His lips curved. "They were simply lads, out for a good time."

"You call that having a good time? All I can say is I'm glad I wasn't alone when they showed."

"Mayhap if ye'd been alone, they wouldnae have bothered ye. No doubt they simply wanted a test of their strength."

“Get real, they’d have robbed me blind,” she said darkly. She glanced at her watch. “We’d better get going. How far is the drive to Inverdeem?”

“I’ve no idea. If we walk it, and push hard, we might get there in the wee hours of the morn.”

“What? You said it was a short walk.”

“It is.”

She huffed out a breath and shook her head. “I thought you didn’t have much time left? Let’s go rent the car and we can probably be there in time to do some research today.”

He sighed. “That’s probably so.”

“I thought you wanted to go home,” she said softly.

He shrugged. “I’ve wanted to walk away from Culloden Moor for more years than I care to count. I’ve wanted to walk all the way home and feel the wind, sun, and rain. See the hills and smell the heather. Walk past mountains and trees. I’ve wanted to take in the sites and feel again. But ye’ve the right of it. I’ve not the time to do such.”

Her heart suddenly ached, but she didn’t think he’d appreciate pity. “Could you please excuse me for a moment? I need to check in with my boss.”

“Dinnae let him bully ye.”

“Are you telling me what to do?”

He sighed. “Call the man.”

She stood and he followed. “You’re not going anywhere are you?”

“Ye’ve my company for a bit longer, and ye’re still in my care.”

She didn’t bother arguing, and reached into her pack and withdrew the phone. She turned it on and after it booted up, she had five text messages. Three were from Mason.

Hey babe, have you had a chance to talk to Perry about a part for me?

Hey babe, I miss you.

Hey, babe. Surprise, I’m in Scotland! You need to call me so we can hook up!

Was he serious? She dialed Mason and it only rang once.

“I wondered when you’d call me back. Your phone just kept kicking over to voicemail, and you didn’t answer my texts.” He sounded whiny and irritable.

“You said you were in Scotland? Are you joking?”

“Oh, no, don’t worry, I’m here. I’ve rented a room outside the Edinburgh airport. Where are you? I need you to come get me. I don’t want to have to rent a car or pay for rooms when we can share.”

Share? They’d never shared a room in their lives. She wasn’t sure what to say to him. “I’m outside of Inverness in the Highlands.” She glanced up at Gareth. “Look. I’m not sure why you’re here, exactly.”

“Oh, you know. I thought if I helped with the research, and if I took a few calls from Perry when he contacts you, it might be good for my career.”

“You want to help me research?”

“Great idea, right?”

She glanced at Gareth to see him glaring. “This just isn’t a good idea.”

“Lissa!” He sounded slightly panicked. “I’m here. I’m at your disposal. I need you to come get me!”

“Edinburgh is hours out of my way. Round trip, it would be even more. I’m not coming. I don’t even have a car at the moment.”

“Fine! I’ll rent a car and come find you.”

“Mason, no. This is not a good idea.”

When Gareth reached for her phone, she was ready for him. She pulled it away from her ear and hissed at him. *“I’ve got this!”*

He folded his arms again, and looked at her, impassive.

“Go back to Inverness,” Mason demanded. “Be there when I arrive.”

“No, Mason, don’t. I won’t be able—”

He’d already hung up.

She looked at her phone. She didn’t want Mason here for her own sake, but knew putting the two men together would be an incredibly bad idea.

Gareth clucked his tongue. “A problem? I told ye to let me take care of it.”

She didn’t appreciate the way he towered over her. “Come on. Let’s go rent a car.”

“What does yer boss want that he’d come all this way to see ye?”

“You could hear my conversation?”

“Parts of it.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but that wasn’t my boss.”

“Who was it?”

“His name is Mason Baldwin. He’s an actor. He thinks if we become a couple, then I might be able to help him with his career.”

“I dinnae like the sounds of that.” His voice was gruff, and he was starting to look angry again.

“I don’t care what you like. Let’s just go.”

“I thought ye needed to call yer boss.”

Feeling the need to flee, she hurried out of the park. “I can only handle one problem at a time. Right now, we’re renting a car. I’ll talk to my boss later.”

He was walking behind her and she’d swear she could almost feel his bad mood growing. “Mayhap we should wait on the man. I should like to meet him.”

“That’s not going to happen. Anyway, I thought I was your personal research assistant. We’re headed toward Inverdeem and that’s final. The sooner we get answers the better, right? Anyway, I don’t want you fighting anymore.”

“Why not? I cannae be hurt.”

“Others can. And no more cutting your body. If you do, I’ll find you a therapist, so you can work out your issues.”

“What issues?”

“Nevermind.”

Feeling a twinge of guilt, she turned off her phone again.

Once they rented a car, it took over two hours to get to Inverdeem, leaving Lissa exasperated that Gareth thought she’d walk the entire way. She didn’t rebuke him though, as she could tell he was getting nervous. He wasn’t talking at all as they closed the distance to Inverdeem.

“I think I’m getting the hang of driving on the wrong side of the road,” Lissa tried an innocuous subject, hoping to relax him. “How about you? You doing okay?”

He grunted. "I suppose I might be gettin' the trick of ridin' in a car. Though if the Scots drive on the left side, I must say, they no doubt have the right of it."

"Why's that?"

"I believe we were here first."

She laughed. "I can't argue that."

"Anyway, I'd think men would drive rather than women. In my time 'tis how it was."

She raised a brow. "Okay, Father Time. You have a lot to learn, so I'll give you a pass on that one."

Gareth stopped talking again, answering only when spoken to, and he wasn't even doing that by the time they arrived.

She watched him taking everything in. Inverdeem was a small village, homes and businesses interspersed with trees, bushes, and a nearby loch. Newer homes were built beside older gabled homes, and brick and timber seemed common. She even saw a decrepit castle off the road that looked like a tourist destination judging by the gated fence. Taverns, stores, and restaurants spread between apartment buildings and more homes. The place was actually quite lovely. "This is beautiful."

Gareth clenched and unclenched his fists.

"Does it look different?"

He finally nodded. "Some of it, of course. We didn't have this large road runnin' about, that's for sure. But some is remarkably familiar."

"I bet it's strange coming home after all this time."

He nodded and directed her to a white church. She pulled into the parking lot, shut off the car, and looked at him. He didn't say anything, so she opened the door, exited, and waited for him to do the same. They stood studying the old white building with its stone foundation.

"It's a pretty church. Do you think any of it is original?"

He shrugged, seeming nervous.

"Let's go inside and see what we can find."

They headed indoors and a priest turned around and smiled at them. "Welcome."

Lissa glanced at Gareth, who made no move, so she walked forward and held out a hand. "Hello, I'm Lissa Stuart from America."

"I can tell by yer accent. I'm Father Ross." He looked curiously behind her.

"Gareth?" She prodded.

Gareth moved forward and spoke Gaelic to the man who responded in kind. Once they started they didn't stop, and Lissa moved away to study the church. It was beautiful, the white of the outside complimenting the classical inside. The dark wood of the pews matched the roof beams, two beautiful stained-glass windows, set behind the altar, depicted saints.

"Miss?"

Lissa turned to see both the priest and Gareth watching her.

She smiled. "Am I allowed to take pictures?"

"Certainly, but I understand ye're hopin' to find some old records? Ye've come to the right place. Both the Roman Catholic church and, after the Reformation, the Church of Scotland were—and are—great record producers. We get this sort of

request more often than ye might think. We have records for baptisms, marriages, and deaths that extend as far back as 1538.”

He directed them into an office with shelves loaded with boxes, as well as a computer at a desk. “If yer searching for relatives or ancestors from our area, chances are I have records that can help ye. If ye can’t find what ye’re lookin’ for, I can send ye to the Diocesan Center where a lot of records are on microfilm. But that’s by appointment only. Let me help ye get situated.”

“Thank you. This is exactly what I was hoping for.”

“This should get ye started. There’s no password on the computer so dinnae worry about that.”

It didn’t take long for Lissa to get started on research. If there was one thing she knew how to do, it was find information.

She could hear Gareth still talking with the priest. “Are there many MacGregor’s left in the area?”

“Quite a few.”

Lissa swiveled in the office chair. “Any who count family going back to Culloden?”

“Some. But many moved on. To be a MacGregor after that time meant ye were hunted for a good 50 years or so. Many went to America, by force or by choice.”

Lissa nodded. She knew that, but judging by Gareth’s face, she wasn’t sure he’d realized. She turned back to her work. She had Gareth’s sister’s name, Tavia MacGregor, and started there. After about twenty minutes she was still having a hard time finding the information she needed.

“Gareth?”

He hurried into the room.

“What was your girlfriend’s name?”

“Girlfriend?”

“The girl you were to marry?”

“Dierdre Campbell.”

“What year was she born?”

“1725.”

She typed the information into the computer and came up with a ton of genealogical information. “I’ve found her. It looks as if she had a lot of family who emigrated to America. Just looking at this, it appears she’s related to thousands of people living in the world.”

“If I’d have married her, all those relatives would be mine?”

She just shrugged.

Gareth went back to chatting with the priest. She could hear them talking about the old ways and how things were different now.

Still nothing on his sister.

She pulled down one of the boxes, pulled back the lid, and gasped. Books of handwritten records dating back hundreds of years were mixed with stacks of photocopied information. She headed out to find the priest. “Have all those records been stored on a computer?”

“Nae, lass. We’re workin’ our way through them. It takes time.”

She realized why she hadn't been able to connect the dots before. The information might be sitting here in Inverdeem and nowhere else in the world. The thought of a fire made her cringe. "Do you have more copies?"

"Aye, lass. Years ago all copies were sent to the University of Edinburgh."

She let out a relieved breath, pulled on some gloves, and started going through the books. She found records going back to the 1600s and was hopeful. Her fingers carefully turned pages as she searched for information. It was difficult because when the MacGregor name was outlawed, many adopted the names of Graham, Murray, Stewart, Grant and even their sometimes enemy, Campbell.

Hours later, she found what she was looking for. She hurried to find Gareth, now asleep on a bench. "Gareth. I think I found your sister. It looks as if she married a man named Robert Grant in 1748."

She continued to read. "She had three children. Two boys and a girl." She smiled and, when she glanced up, his expression was hopeful. She continued to study the book until finally she found what she was searching for.

She double checked the names and sat back, her mouth slightly parted. How was she going to tell him this?

"What is it, lass?"

Perhaps she should lie to him. He was leaving soon. Why should he have the pain of this?

"Tell me! I can see ye're thinkin' on lyin', but dinnae bother. I'll know if ye're tellin' me the truth."

She wished she was anywhere else at that moment.

"Lass?"

"It looks like... it looks like one of Tavia's children had children. But by the year 1807 the entire family line is gone. Wiped out by an epidemic. Most of them are buried in a churchyard at Balquhiddar." Her voice trailed off as she turned her worried glance upon him.

Chapter 8

Gareth's throat tightened to the point he swallowed twice, unable to speak. He bent over to glare at the record book as if to make sense of the gibberish written there, but the words meant naught to him. "That..." he cleared his throat. "That cannae be right, can it?"

The priest moved forward. "I'm sorry to say it, but that was often the case. Childbirth, dysentery, war—plague, murder, execution. Sometimes entire families were suddenly wiped out." The man peered at Gareth, curiosity on his face. He'd no doubt the priest wondered why the deaths of people hundreds of years ago should matter now.

Fearing the emotions showed plain upon his face, Gareth drew a breath, straightened, and moved away. He headed out the door and heard Lissa call his name, but it sounded as if it came from a great distance.

He carefully walked down the steps toward the car.

Within 50 years of his sister's death all of her line died? There was nobody left? All of her children and grandchildren gone? He scrubbed his face with his hands.

He thought about all the times he'd wondered. The times he'd woken from a deep sleep and searched through visitor's faces, hunting for a familiar nose, brow, and way of speech. Listening for familiar names.

Everyone had family! They didn't just die out.

Even his former love had a large posterity.

His mouth tightened. He'd wanted to know. He'd wished to find his living family and be assured it all meant something. That pain, life and death, all meant something. Then, when the witch came for him, he could move on. He could get his revenge against Charles Stuart and progress to the hereafter. Or wherever it was determined he should go.

But now what? It all seemed for naught. His life, that of his entire family—the loving, the pain, the hardscrabble drive for something more—all seemed meaningless.

He could feel tears burn his nose, his eyes, and his jaw tightened to the point of pain. Abruptly, he strode into the woods without a thought. He could hear Lissa calling after him and walked faster. He didn't want to see her. He didn't need a living reminder The Young Pretender had living, breathing relatives while he had none.

Without thinking he headed for the place he went to be alone, to talk to God, or to recover from a thrashing.

It was still there, his waterfall, the pond, the boulders.

Was this it then? Was it—*life*—all for naught?

He sat on a boulder, put his head in his hands, and wept.

Maybe she'd missed something. After taking a few pictures of the church and the surrounding area for her boss, Lissa sat in the car and continued the search on her computer. Perhaps she'd got it all wrong? Please, God, let her find she'd got it wrong.

She did a backward search on the Internet, providing names of Gareth's ancestors and started with the names of lairds from previous decades and centuries.

She was about to give up that line of reasoning when she got a hit.

A Mr. Ian MacGregor listed genealogies on an elaborate website and the lairds he claimed relations to were the same as Gareth's.

She did a search forward and backward, checking and double checking the names, but couldn't find the missing family link that connected Tavia MacGregor's children to this Mr. Ian MacGregor. There was an email address for him.

She checked again, but still couldn't find the connection that led the man to his conclusions. So how could he claim the same relatives as Gareth? It didn't make any sense. Was the man part of another family? A distant cousin? Had he mixed up his MacGregor ancestors? Was he the world's worst genealogist, making up facts to support his findings?

As far as she could see, Gareth's line died out. She'd seen copies of original records.

She sighed. Regardless, the man was obviously passionate about his ancestry to list all the information he'd collected. What if he had more materials than she had access to? Perhaps he had yet to input everything?

She clicked his email address and wrote him a brief note about who she was searching for, a list of the relatives Gareth MacGregor had in common with him, and how they were looking for answers.

She glanced up, but there was still no sign of Gareth. Should she follow him into the woods? What if he didn't come back?

She'd sit here all day if she had to. She'd wait for him until there was no hope left.

The pain in his face had been stark, real—and that anguish pierced her own heart.

How could she have feelings for the man so quickly?

Could someone actually fall in love in a day or two?

That was ridiculous, of course. They'd just met. Sure, the man attracted her, but was it normal for her heart to ache as if she was the one who'd just lost her family?

She admired him. She admired his strength, his honor, and his one track mind. She loved the way he looked at her. Maybe it was as simple as that. How long had it been since a man had teased her, protected her, and looked at her with such interest. Never, that's how long.

And he was leaving. Today or tomorrow, according to him.

Why did she always want what she couldn't have?

Her computer dinged to let her know she'd received an email. She opened it to see Mr. Ian MacGregor had responded.

You say you're in Inverdeem? And you have a MacGregor with you? I'm only thirty minutes away. Can we meet? Today? Come over and we'll have some refreshments and a chat, what say you? If he is related to me through Brecken and Victoria MacGregor, he's definitely part of my clan, and I'll insist on meeting him.

There was a phone number listed.

Part of his clan?

Lissa suddenly felt overwhelmingly possessive of the other man claiming Gareth. Because she was starting to consider him hers?

She looked out the windshield to see if she could spot Gareth. What if he'd simply disappeared? Melted to mist, and was forever out of her reach.

The thought made her stomach hurt.

She quickly responded to the email. *I'll have to find my companion as he's wandered off for a bit. I'll get back to you.*

She turned on her phone, ignored incoming text messages, and quickly input Ian MacGregor's phone number. She stepped out of the car and went looking for her ghost.

When she finally found him, he was sitting beside a waterfall, big, strong, and forlorn. Emotions overwhelmed her—tenderness, gratitude, and relief—and sympathetic tears flooded her eyes. She just stood for a moment and watched him.

Finally, she hurried forward. "Gareth." She placed a hand on his chilled shoulder. "I was so worried about you. I thought you'd left."

He looked up and she noted his red eyes. More tears sprang to her own and she dropped her gaze so he wouldn't see. Instead, she slid onto his lap and wrapped her arms around him, half expecting to be rejected and pushed away.

Instead, his arms engulfed her, he held her tight, and pressed his face into her neck. They stayed that way for a long while, the connection between them seeming to grow stronger with every passing moment. On her part at least.

Was this her answer? Was she actually falling in love with him? Or was this just some sort of temporary insanity? Finally, she took a breath. "I found someone who might have more information about your family. I wrote to him, and he wrote me back."

"Wrote to him?" Gareth's eyes flashed confusion.

"Over the computer."

He nodded. "Ye live in a fast world. What did the man say?"

"He doesn't live far from here and wants to meet you. His name is Ian MacGregor and he seems to believe you might be related to him. Be a part of his clan."

He canted his head to the side and grief flickered in his red-rimmed eyes. "I thought they were all dead. Every last one of them."

She shrugged. "I kept searching. It's what I do." She gave him a soft smile. "It may be nothing, but he might have some information the priest and his records aren't privy to. I think it's worth going to meet him, don't you?"

He looked at her intently, grasped her face between his palms, brushed his thumbs along her cheekbones, and swiftly bent to kiss her. His mouth was soft on hers, seeking, but her reaction was anything but gentle. The shock of that light touch ran through her as a sizzle flashed along her skin. Hard muscles bunched under her hands where she clung to his shoulders.

One of his hands slid to tighten in her hair and his other, hot against her back, bent her slightly, leaving her unbalanced, clinging, as she hoped the kiss would never end. She felt a neediness in him she wholeheartedly responded to with a yearning of her own. She never wanted to leave his embrace.

A moment later he broke the kiss and strong muscular arms banded around her as, hearts pounding, they both gasped for air. After a moment, he brought his hand up to cup her cheek again and pressed his forehead to hers, breathing with her, his warm, clean breath mingling with her own.

"All right, lass. Let's go meet this man."

As they drove down the road, not really speaking, Lissa was relieved when the phone rang so she wouldn't have to be with her thoughts anymore. If he could make her feel this way so soon, how was she supposed to maintain an emotional distance from him? The guy would be gone within hours. She needed to protect her heart. She needed to remember this was just a road trip, a short break in the daily routine, and not a lifetime commitment. She picked up her phone and glanced at it as she drove.

"Who is it?"

"I don't recognize the number."

He took it from her and pushed the talk button.

She scowled. "I wasn't going to answer while driving," she said in an undertone. "Anyway, how did you even know how to do that?"

He shrugged. "People at the visitors center carry them about like the most precious of jewels, talkin' to them, tappin' at them. I've seen hundreds."

"Well, then you know what to do. Say hello."

He lifted the phone cautiously to his ear. "Hello, then."

"Who is this?" In the quiet of the car, Lissa could hear Mason's indignant voice coming from the phone.

"I am Gareth Alexander Sutherland MacGregor." Gareth grinned at Lissa, plainly enjoying the new experience. "And who might you be?"

"I'm Lissa's boyfriend, Mason Baldwin."

Gareth lowered the phone and scowled at it.

"Here, let me have it." She took the phone. "Mason?"

"Lissa! Where are you? I have been trying to track you down all day."

She refused to feel guilty. His coming to Scotland wasn't her fault. "Mason, I told you I wasn't coming. I'm very busy doing research and, as you heard, I already have someone with me."

Gareth arched a brow and she was grateful for his presence. Would she have caved if he weren't with her?

"Are you ditching my calls? I borrowed a phone so I'd be calling from another number. Only then did I get hold of you!"

"I just barely turned it back on."

"Just tell me where you are, babe."

"I'm sorry you came all this way, but that's not my fault."

"Lissa, come on. The plane tickets were expensive and I thought we'd be sharing a room on Perry's dime."

"Really? You did, huh?" At his assumption, all sympathy fled. "You should have called to ask me if I was okay with that plan. I'll talk to you later." She hung up and placed the phone back in the cup holder.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Gareth studying her. "What?"

"Boyfriend?"

Her text beeped and she ignored it. "No."

After a moment, Gareth looked out the window at the passing scenery. A few minutes later, she glanced at him. She didn't like that he looked so unhappy. "Are you all right?"

The phone rang again. She picked it up, expecting Mason, so was surprised to see Perry calling. "Hello?"

"Hey, Lissa, how's it going so far? Where are you?" Was it her imagination or was the man's tone less demanding than usual?

"I've just been doing some research at a church house in Inverdeem and am now headed to talk with a man who might have more information."

"What kind of information?" Again, Perry didn't sound as insistent as usual. Gareth's influence? Or coincidence?

"I really don't want to go into detail yet in case it doesn't pan out." She wasn't exactly lying. She was picking up all sorts of facts from Gareth as they walked, taking pictures, and the man they were on their way to see just might end up a

good resource as he was into genealogy. None of this was wasted as far as her job was concerned.

“Okay, okay, I hear you. But it’s good stuff, right?”

“Definitely.” Since when did he trust her to do anything without his input? This was so weird, but she was appreciative of the fact he wasn’t grilling her. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“All right. Sounds good. Talk to you later.”

Lissa set the phone in a cup holder and gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

All right? Perry was definitely acting strange.

“That was yer boss?”

“Yes, he treated me better than he normally does.”

His lips curled into a satisfied smile. “People treat ye the way ye allow them to.”

She couldn’t say he was wrong, but his masculine smugness grated. Still, that was better than the sadness she’s glimpsed earlier. “So, you good?”

“Good?”

“Happy? Enjoying our trip? Looking forward to seeing another MacGregor?”

He blew out a breath. “I suppose. Still, I am wonderin’ what it’s all for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Life. What is it for? What is the meanin’?”

She blew out a breath. “That’s a pretty big question, but I’ll take a stab at it. Life is for living. No matter who you are, what you are, we all have one thing in common. We are put here to live, to love, to experience.”

“And then what? Ye live in a softer world than I did, lass.”

“We all have trials, Gareth. Granted, few of us will ever fight in battles the way you did, though that’s still going on today for a lot of men in the military.”

“Ye misunderstand me.” His voice was laced with sadness. “If ye’ve naught left at the end of it, no family to live beyond ye, then why bother with the lot of it? Where’s the sense in it?”

She frowned. She could tell him there were many in the world who, by choice or circumstance, never had families or children, but he was talking about his own experience, not someone else’s. She didn’t have answers for him. She stared out at the road and exhaled slowly. She wished he could have the chance to have what so obviously mattered to him. A family.

She simply placed her hand over his where it rested on his knee and he immediately entwined their fingers.

Her chest ached. Please, God, let the man they were about to see have the type of answers Gareth needed to hear.

The GPS navigation system directed them onto a long, tree-covered driveway where they passed through open, wrought-iron gates. Tall shrubbery on either side lent the place a wild, untamed appearance at odds with the pristine lawn. They finally stopped in front of a mansion that evoked Old-World elegance and charm. It wasn’t quite a castle, but several turrets and balconies, plus the stone front, lent the house the flavor of one. Iron benches sat near a small pond, and whimsical lawn ornaments added a magical touch. With all the trees and bushes surrounding the place, it looked charming, elegant, and somehow homey.

Lissa leaned forward to get a better look through the windshield. "It's beautiful."

"Aye. I've not seen anythin' quite like it. I still dinnae see how the man could possibly be related to me."

Lissa didn't see how either. "You never know. We might find out something interesting. Research is like that. One piece of information can lead to another, which can lead to another. I haven't done a lot of genealogy before, so perhaps I missed something. It's certainly worth a shot." She undid her seatbelt. "Come on, let's go."

"Mmmphm." Gareth made a low Scottish noise deep in his throat.

Amused, she bent to glance in the car. "And that means?"

He shook his head, exited the car, and followed.

"The roses smell good."

When he didn't respond, she glanced over to see him rubbing the back of his neck and looking slightly nervous.

"I'll do all the talking, all right?"

He nodded once.

Before they reached the door, it opened, and a large, dark-haired man stood studying Gareth, vivid green eyes slightly narrowed with suspicion. He wore jeans and a button-down shirt with rolled up sleeves. Tall, with a cleft chin, he was extraordinarily handsome, but looked dangerous, more than capable of defending hearth and home.

He did remember he'd invited them, didn't he?

The man suddenly smiled, wariness replaced with satisfaction. "Welcome." He gestured them forward. "Come in, come in." After a quick glance at Lissa, he couldn't seem to take his gaze off Gareth. "Welcome, both of ye."

They moved past him into a foyer with a tall ceiling that rose to the second floor, arched doorways leading to other rooms, stained glass windows, and sconces in the walls. A staircase went up the side of one wall and wood floors, plush carpeting, and rugs completed the luxurious effect.

"You have a beautiful home."

"Thank ye. I'm glad ye made it so quickly." He led the way and took them into a large, ornately decorated room and gestured them toward a leather couch. "Have a seat, will ye?"

They did, and he sat on the other side of a low table, directly across from them.

Lissa couldn't help glancing around at all of the finery. There were more medieval touches, including weapons on the walls, heavy drapes over the windows, and a coat of arms. A giant stone fireplace covered an entire wall, a wood shelf displaying modern decorations including candles, decorative frames, and a vase filled with lavender. The room was a clever mix of modern and medieval.

The man leaned forward and clasped his hands between spread knees. "I am Ian MacGregor."

Gareth didn't say anything but continued to stare at the man, his expression suspicious.

Lissa sat forward. "I'm Lissa Stuart, and this is Gareth MacGregor. We were doing a bit of genealogical research earlier, and I found it interesting the two of you have ancestors in common, but I can't find anything from the early 1800s forward. Can you tell me how you made the connection?"

“Of course. I was born in the year 1231. In the year 1260, when I was laird of Clan MacGregor, I traveled across time with my wife who was born in this era and went to fetch me.” He rubbed his hands together. “Now, tell me about yerself Gareth MacGregor. Who, exactly, are yer people? I’d like to discover just exactly how we’re related.”

Chapter 9

“What a load of pish.”

Gareth stood and reached for the anger so familiar to him. “Come, Lissa. I’ll not waste my time speakin’ to a liar and a fraud.” He glanced pointedly at the lying fraud and his lips curled in a sneer. “In any century.”

He headed toward the doorway, then stopped to wait, his hand, palm upward, outstretched toward Lissa. He now had what? The rest of the day? Mayhap until tomorrow morning until the witch showed? He did not need this havoring knapdarloch wasting his time.

Eyes wide, Lissa stood, her mouth slightly parted. She looked at their host, then at Gareth. She seemed about to speak, then shrugged, shook her head, and hurried forward to clasp Gareth’s hand.

Gratified by her quick acceptance, by the way she clung, he led the way out of the room.

“Áit bhfuil tú dul?” Ian stood as he asked where Gareth was going.

Gareth stopped to respond in kind. “Níl Tá mé ag am chun éisteacht leis an prattle na fools.”

Ian laughed. “Prattle of fools, is it? I’ve not heard Gaelic spoken in such a way since the 13th century.”

Gareth stopped. “I’m from the 18th.”

Ian’s brows rose. “Be that as it may, yer speech is closer to mine than those who speak Gaelic in this time.”

Gareth waved a hand in dismissal and swung to leave again.

“Ye claim to have lived 300 years ago, yet ye cannae believe I lived 800?”

Gareth could feel the man’s penetrating gaze and turned to look at him once more. “I lived 270 years ago.”

Ian’s brows rose. “Culloden Moor, was it?”

Gareth nodded once.

Ian whistled softly. “That’s a barrel of worms, is it not? How did ye end up here and now?”

Gareth hesitated as a thought occurred to him, one that gave him hope in light of the man’s claims. “Were ye brought back to life by a witch? Did she leave ye here?”

“Nae, by my wife and a doctor. I was gut shot with an arrow by a Campbell. My wife brought me to a surgeon who possessed the skill to heal me.”

Sliding an arm around Lissa, Gareth slowly walked back into the room. He hesitated, then sank onto the couch and, tugging Lissa against his side, wrapped an arm tight about her.

“All right, let’s hear the whole of it, then.”

A gratified expression on his face, Ian sank into the cushions at his back. “I’ve told ye how I arrived here. I’d love to hear yer story if ye’re willin’ to share.”

Gareth stood and paced to the fireplace. He rubbed the back of his neck as he stared unseeing at the unlit wood. “As ye guessed, I died at Culloden Moor. I’ve been there ever since with 78 of my brothers—shades, wraiths, unfeeling, and benumbed. A witch offered us an opportunity.”

Ian, not commenting, listened closely as Gareth told him about everything that had happened. “So, as ye can see, a chance at Charles Stuart is an opportunity not to be denied.”

Ian blew out a breath. “I’ve read everythin’ I can about Scottish history. Everything I missed. But Culloden Moor...” He shook his head. “It was a tragedy. And the ramifications are still in effect to this verra day. Charles Stuart was an idiot. The entire fiasco was a tactical disaster at best, but at the heart of it, a criminal matter. It was unforgivable.”

“Aye.” An unexpected release of tension rushed through Gareth, and he expelled a harsh breath. “The opportunity to repay him was irresistible.”

“As I imagine was the second chance at livin’. I know I jumped at it when it happened to me.”

Gareth had to laugh at the fact that while he’d not believed Ian, the man had no problem believing him. He glanced at Lissa to see her gripping her hands, white faced and confused.

Ian continued. “The battle should have been fought in London. Ye would have won. It would have changed everything if Lord Murray hadn’t listened to that spy Dudley Bradstreet.”

The man understood. “Aye. We were so certain as we marched. When ordered to turn around, it greatly discouraged us. And to find later that London was in a panic, unprotected, the French ready to battle...” Gareth shook his head as he stared into the distance, remembering.

Ian was nodding. “I completely agree.”

It felt good to have someone else, someone with an objective eye, talk of the fiasco aloud. Understand where their resentments lay.

Ian shook his own head, disgust apparent on his face. “And the mismanagement of the battle, well they’d had months to determine where it should take place to have the tactical advantage. It’s shameful Charles Stuart would hobble his men in such a fashion and give them the disadvantage and bottleneck them during the battle. To place ye all before a bog, to block ye with a wall,” he shook his head again. “Twas truly reprehensible.”

“Yes!” Gareth exploded. “Twas dishonorable and vile. We’d followed the man, believed in him, obeyed and marched at his whim. We were cold and starved by the aborted effort the night before. If ye’d have been there, waitin’ for the prince, awaitin’ the order to fight that never came—the sense of betrayal was overwhelmin’.” Gareth stared at naught, remembering. “I had my two brothers with me. I’d talked them into supportin’ the cause. Then when no orders were given. It was chaos...” Gareth shook his head to try and clear it.

Ian exhaled sharply. "That's rough. Much harder than losin' yer own life, I imagine."

Lissa held out her hand and Gareth moved to take it, to sink beside her onto the couch once more. Clutching her hand he lay back and looked up at the ceiling. He swallowed. "In the final moments, somehow we broke through the line. We still thought we had a chance. My brothers, though behind me, died first. My mind was gone as I killed as many as possible, but they were too many. They reloaded more quickly than ye can imagine..."

He reached for the pewter cross about his neck—then remembered it had fallen off in battle.

Ian was silent a moment. "So ye have to go back, d'ye?"

"Aye. To have my shot." Gareth straightened so he could see Ian's face. "The witch, Soni, has promised me a chance to face Charles Stuart and hopefully get a bit of revenge."

"I see."

"I'm not convinced she'll be able to keep her promise. I'm hopeful, of course, but not convinced. Mayhap she'll not be willin' to help after I disobeyed her wishes."

"Ye said she was young."

"She's but sixteen."

"She'll have a soft heart. She'll understand and forgive."

"As my family died off, can ye tell me how ye believe we're related. By clan or by blood?"

"Both. Ye came through Laird Brecken, my cousin and the man who became Laird after me."

A beautiful, red-haired woman entered the room and smiled warmly. "Hello, everyone. Sorry I couldn't meet you when you arrived." Her accent was American. "I was putting the baby down for a nap."

"My wife, Samantha." Pride glowed in Ian's green eyes as he held out a hand to the jeans-clad woman who moved forward to sink against his side, their bodies pressed together as Ian wrapped one arm about her and pulled her close. "And this is Lissa Stuart and Gareth MacGregor."

Samantha grinned at Gareth. "Which, of course, means you're under my husband's protection for as long as he can keep you there. He still thinks he's Laird."

Ian jostled his wife and grinned. "Old habits..."

She rubbed a hand along his black-stubbled jaw. "Very old habits."

They were still grinning at each other when Gareth asked, "Ye've a child?"

"Aye." Ian nodded, pride fierce and shining in his gaze. "Would ye care to see him?"

All sorts of feelings welled up inside Gareth—joy, envy, relief. If Ian McGregor truly was related to him, a child meant some of their line, some of their blood, yet lived and would live on. Mayhap Gareth could move on more easily with that knowledge.

His chest tightened as he squeezed Lissa's hand. He turned away as tears moistened his eyes and he nodded. He cleared his throat twice.

"I would. I surely would."

Lissa's fingers ached as she clenched and unclenched her hand, but she'd have died before saying a word about it. Gareth needed her, and she'd been glad to hold his hand through all the revelations.

She followed behind as they all walked up the staircase. She hadn't understood everything they'd said as they'd switched between Gaelic and English, but she'd understood the gist of the conversation. Her stomach seemed to roil with anxiety. It had been a lot to take in.

Two warriors discussing a battle one of them had been in.

Medieval and modern decor carried on to the upstairs, with stone accent walls, more sconces lit with electricity and antique furniture. As a researcher, she couldn't help but wonder how much was authentic to the medieval period and what was replicated. But authentic or not, it all looked beautiful.

Samantha led them into a lovingly decorated nursery and stood before a crib. She smiled down at the sleeping baby, pride in her expression as she glanced at them. "He sleeps like the dead this time of day, so you don't need to worry about waking him." She gestured them forward as she moved into her husband's arms.

Lissa couldn't resist and peeked into the crib, her fingers gripping the rail tightly. The baby was sound asleep on his back, arms spread, tiny fists slightly relaxed. He had his father's dark hair, and his lips suckled occasionally. He was darling. Lissa smiled at Samantha. "Oh, he's adorable. How old?"

"Just over six months."

When Gareth looked down at the sleeping baby, his face filled with such emotion Lissa glanced away to give him some privacy.

"Look at that chin juttin' out. He's a MacGregor, for sure." Gareth's voice was low and rough, and he cleared his throat. "What have ye named him?"

"He's named Michael for my grandfather," Samantha said.

Lissa rubbed Gareth's back, then moved away. She was breathing too fast. She just wasn't sure what to think. If she could accept Gareth had been a ghost, why couldn't these two be time travelers as well? Perhaps next she might walk outside and greet an alien or two.

Samantha crossed the room. "It's a lot to take in, isn't it?"

Lissa nodded. "Ever since I met Gareth, it's been a lot to take in. And now this," She gestured toward the other woman's husband. "It just keeps getting crazier."

Samantha laughed. "Welcome to my life."

Lissa rubbed her temples with both hands. "Say I suspend disbelief. I mean, I've already pretty much done that, anyway. How is any of this possible? You time-traveled to medieval Scotland and brought your husband back with you? Did I misunderstand?"

"No, that's it in a nutshell. You can drive yourself crazy trying to find answers, but I've found it's just better to go with it." Lissa followed Samantha's gaze to where her husband, hand on Gareth's shoulder as they both looked at the baby, quietly spoke Gaelic again, discussing whatever it was ancient warriors discussed. "You never know how much time you have." She glanced at Lissa again. "So live life, be wild, laugh, touch, kiss. Take whatever crumbs life sees fit to bestow. That's the way we see it, anyway."

"That's good advice."

When the baby squeaked, Samantha led them all out of the room and quietly shut the door before leading them downstairs again. Just as they reach the bottom of the stairs. The doorbell rang.

Samantha glanced back at her husband. "Are you expecting anyone?"

"Nae, I'm not." He strode past them to answer the door while they waited behind him in the foyer.

"Is there a Lissa Stuart here?"

Lissa's mouth fell open as she hurried to the door to see Mason Baldwin, tall, dark, and too handsome for words standing there. Talk about aliens roaming around outside. "Mason, what are you doing here? How did you even find me?"

He smiled, and it truly was a gorgeous smile. Based on looks and ambition, Mason truly might be a leading man one day. Just not hers. "It wasn't hard. Your iPhone led me right to you."

She threw her hands up in the air and made a sound of disgust.

She should have bought an Android.

Gareth's gray eyes widened as a big, muscular man gathered Lissa up in his arms, his biceps bulging.

He crossed to the couple, pulled Lissa away, and easily shoved and tripped the man to the ground where he stared up at Gareth, mouth gaping like a fish.

He pushed Lissa behind him and waited for the other man to get up and fight... and then he waited some more. "Are ye to lay there all day, then?"

"Why did you do that?" The man's expression remained stunned and he actually looked hurt, as if Gareth had wounded his feelings.

Gareth made a sound of disgust before turning to Lissa. "Who is this man?"

The other man finally found his voice as he sputtered. "Who am I? Who are you?"

Gareth ignored the man. "Lissa?"

"Oh. He's... um... he's someone I work with. He's an actor. Mason Baldwin. Why did you push him down?"

"I dinnae care for the man. He's forward and discourteous. And he's followin' ye about without yer permission." He shot the man another glare, daring him to get up. Ian had weapons on his walls and Gareth considered them. A sword through the belly might have the man rethinking his actions in the presence of a lady. Or perhaps a dirk to the face.

The man, Mason, started to snifle! "Lissa, don't you want me here?"

Gareth stared, baffled by the man's attitude. He lay like a dog, belly up, muscles loose. He obviously wouldn't give much of a fight, if any at all. Gareth glanced back at Ian who stood, hand over his mouth, as if fighting laughter. "Are men so different now?"

Ian shrugged. "I expect they are the same since the beginnin' of time. Some fighters, others not."

Lissa edged around Gareth to help the other man stand. She struggled under his weight and Gareth had to force himself to stillness so as not to knock the man to his back again.

"Mason, I did ask you to go home."

Gareth pulled Lissa from the other man and into the protection of his arms. "I'll ask again, who is he? Or rather, who is he to ye?"

"Does it really matter?" She sounded sad.

A sharp pain pierced his chest as he took her meaning. He was leaving, probably within hours, so he'd no answer to give that would please her.

He wasn't to stay with her, was he? So her connection to this man didn't matter, or rather, it shouldn't.

He looked at Mason, then glanced back at Ian, whose wife was now secured within his arms. Jealousy seared him. He glanced at the weapons once more. As they were in the presence of ladies, perhaps his fists would do well enough for a cur who showed such lack of spine. A few bruises and cuts might even make the man less attractive. If he was to be the man in Lissa's life after he was gone, Gareth would not waste this opportunity to beat the man. To show Lissa...

To show Lissa what? That he would have been a good protector if he'd been able to stay with her? Did he want to leave the girl with the regrets he was feeling so intensely? He released Lissa once more to gently urge her behind him.

She clung.

The other man had the body of a warrior and a very pretty face. If this was the sort of man that attracted Lissa, then she certainly wouldn't want himself, made up of scars and grimness as he was. He wasn't a fit match for her sunny nature and soft heart.

Samantha moved away from Ian. "Perhaps we could simply invite our new guest inside and offer him refreshment?"

"'Tis naught, sweetlin'. Gareth was simply tryin' to have a conversation with Lissa's new friend."

Gareth scowled at him. This was senseless. He needed to leave before Lissa's tender heart was hurt. "I thank ye for yer hospitality, Lady Samantha." He nodded at Ian. "Laird."

Hands clasped behind his back, Ian nodded once. "If ye're able to come back, ye are welcome here, anytime, for as long as ye like."

He knew he wouldn't be back. He had an appointment with a witch. No doubt if he started walking to Culloden Moor, Soni would pluck him up along the way.

He released a stunned-looking Lissa, moved past Mason, bumped the other man's shoulder, and walked toward the tree-lined drive.

He had no place here, and anyway, it was time for him to do the right thing.

Chapter 10

Lissa headed out after Gareth. "Where are you going?"

He didn't answer but continued on, the space between them growing.

She hesitated, stopped. "Do you want a ride?" She called after him.

"Come on love. Let him go." Mason was at her side, whispering desperately in her ear and clutching her elbow. "It'll be more fun with just the two of us and, after all, I came all this way."

She jerked her elbow out of his hand and stopped. "And why, exactly, did you come all this way?"

She was still looking at Gareth. With his long stride, he easily walked away, gaining distance. After he'd shoved Mason to the ground, she'd been unhappy with him, but now all she felt was a sense of panic. That and irritation over the fact Mason wouldn't leave her alone.

Mason was frowning. "To be with you, of course," his voice wheedled.

"Of course, my foot. You're just hoping I'll recommend you for the movie Perry is making. That is the extent of our relationship, end of story."

"Yes, well, I'll admit I do want that. I want it a lot. But that doesn't mean my feelings for you are any less real."

She studied his heartfelt expression and rolled her eyes. The guy had definitely made the correct career choice. "Mason, other than intense irritation, I have no feelings for you, so your point is moot." She glanced toward Gareth, growing smaller in the distance, and her heart clenched. If he could walk away so easily, why was she chasing after him?

Mason still chattered away, his baritone voice and movie star good looks only irritating her all the more. Gareth had terrorized her, kidnapped her, and forced her to go along with his plans. What, exactly, was she doing pining after him?

Mason took her hand in his. "Come on," he gave her his best smile. "It's Scotland in the summertime. Let's take this chance to get to know one another better."

She wrenched her hand away. Turned, and ran back to the car. He *had* terrorized her. He *had* kidnapped her and forced her to go along with his plans.

And now he was just walking away? Without so much as a word of farewell? An apology? A kiss?

Over his dead body.

He had to get away. The realization he'd no claim to Lissa was killing him. What had he been thinking? That they'd live a long and happy life together?

She'd burrowed under his skin. Somehow, he'd let her in, absorbed her sweetness, the way she smelled, the taste of her lips and become... possessive.

He wished he could have what Ian had. He wanted Lissa for his own. Wanted to watch her grow round with his babe. Wanted a home with her. Wanted... everything.

But that wasn't going to happen, was it?

The man—Mason—was obviously a friend to her, and perhaps more. He'd certainly seemed to think they were more. He could give her a home, children, everything.

Though he couldn't protect her.

The thought of the large, muscled man, his belly exposed like a frightened dog, made him gnash his teeth in fury. Perhaps in this world of soft men, she didn't need protection. Then he remembered the young men, their weapons at the ready. If Gareth hadn't been there, then what? He pictured Mason on the ground, his belly exposed, as they robbed Lissa and perhaps did worse.

He heard her call after him, could hear anger in her tone, but kept walking.

She shouldn't be alone. After he was gone, she should have someone. Perhaps Pretty Man's failings would make her remember Gareth with fondness. So it was good he hadn't picked up a weapon, driven a sword into the man, or slashed his face with a dagger. Though he did wish he would have punched him in the face at least once. Maybe twice.

Lissa stopped calling after him.

He refused to look back. She'd no doubt given up on him. Mayhap she'd realized the same things he had. That they could never be together. Did she even want to keep him? Or perhaps she truly did wish to be with Pretty Man.

He didn't know why the witch hadn't appeared to him yet. If giving Lissa up to another man wasn't the most selfless thing he'd done in his life, he didn't know what was. He was owed his shot at Bonnie Prince Charlie, and he was going to get it! He'd at least have some joy before he passed on to the hereafter.

His fists clenched.

Giving Lissa up should count as ten good deeds at the very least. He should get ten shots at Charles Stuart.

And if the witch refused to appear, to give him his due, he'd simply walk all the way back to Culloden Moor and confront her there.

Again, he had to force himself not to look back.

Lissa was better off without him.

Lissa's hands gripped the steering wheel and she leaned forward, scanning the road in front of her.

Gareth was so not getting away with this!

She glanced in her rear-view mirror to see Mason following in his rental car. He'd tried to get in her passenger seat, but she'd locked the door and given him a grim smile.

Better luck next time.

She hadn't said the words aloud, but she'd hoped he'd read the expression on her face, and maybe he had, because he'd hit the trunk as she'd hit the accelerator.

She was glad she wasn't the only one frustrated by the situation. She blamed him. Chasing off her Highlander? Just so he could get a part in a movie? Of all the nerve!

And Gareth. He was a jerk, too. Did he think he could just drag her around for two days, and then disappear without so much as a by-your-leave? He'd convinced her to join him, to fall in with his plans. Convinced her he was an immortal ancient ghost and she was safe with him, in his care, protected. Sudden tears moistened her eyes. He'd kissed her, depended on her, and convinced her she had growing feelings for him. He'd pulled those feelings out of her!

Who did he think he was to use her like that! She'd had it with being used and pushed around by men. When she caught up to him, she'd be glad to tell him exactly that.

She drove around the corner, and when he wasn't there, her heart seemed to beat in her throat. Had he skipped out on her? Gone through the trees so her car couldn't follow?

She hit the steering wheel.

Perhaps that young witch had come to get him.

More tears rushed to her eyes and fell, and she swiped the back of her hand across both cheeks. Was he gone forever?

She rounded the corner, and saw him jogging in the distance.

Running from her?

She sucked in a breath, angry all over again. She couldn't believe she'd wasted even one minute on him. One single emotion. She should have screamed for help. She should have run from him. Made his life miserable until he let her go.

She pushed the accelerator and sped toward him, her wheels spinning and kicking up grass when another car drove by from the opposite direction. It didn't slow her down. She drove up to him, slowed, and rolled down her window. "Where do you think you're going?"

His lips tightened. Oh, so he was angry, was he? Well, too bad! "Well?"

He stopped and, breathing heavily, put his hands on his hips. "Are ye followin' me, lass?"

Was he serious? If she ran him over right this minute, then it would be exactly what he deserved!

He pointed behind her. "Why dinnae ye go back to yer pretty man? There's naught for ye here."

She glanced in the mirror to see Mason had pulled up behind her. When she glanced back, Gareth had started walking again. She'd never actually been angry enough to see red before, and a logical part of herself thought it was an interesting sensation. The rest of her wanted blood!

She remembered the young man in the park who'd stabbed Gareth. If she had a knife right now, she'd honestly be tempted to do the same. She gritted her teeth and tightened her hands with such force her skin squeaked against the steering wheel.

And Gareth hadn't even been hurt! Unless it was a trick, Gareth was supposedly immortal.

That thought was all it took to have her stomping on the accelerator and swinging the car. She was looking right at him, and he at her, when she hit him, the car tossed him off the road, into the grass, and down a slight hill.

She stopped the car and jumped out. "I said, where do you think you're going?"

He jumped up, unharmed, and stalked up the hill. "What d'ye think yer doin'?" His voice had gone guttural, his accent more pronounced. "This is why women should not be allowed to drive!" He jabbed the air with his index finger. "Drivin' is a job for a man. And this is exactly why! Women are too emotional!"

Mason jumped out of his car. "Lissa," he said in a shocked tone. "I can't believe you—"

"Shut up, Mason!"

"Haud yer wheesht, mon!"

"Now." She ignored Gareth's harsh breathing and clenched fists and ran a hand down her shirt to smooth out any wrinkles. "Where are you going?"

"I can't believe you did that!" Mason sounded genuinely shocked.

They both ignored him.

"I was goin' to Culloden Moor to see the witch and my brothers. I'll let the witch do what she will to me. I had hoped leavin' ye in the care of Pretty Man would be considered my deed of kindness."

"Deed of kindness? Come back up on the road so I can mow you down with the car again. I don't need a pimp."

"I'll do no such thing!" He paused. "What is a pimp?"

"A procuress. A flesh-peddler. A—"

His face reddened again. "I am no such thing!"

"Well, then stop trying to get me a boyfriend."

He frowned.

"You're certainly not going to Culloden Moor without me. After everything we've been through, you're not going to desert me now. Don't you think I have the right to see how this all plays out?"

Lips pressed tight, they stood facing each other, breathing harshly, and Lissa watched as his face softened.

"D'ye think it was easy for me to let ye go?" Gareth's voice was soft now.

"It seemed like it was very easy."

"Well, it wasnae. But it had to be done. I was simply tryin' to find a man to care for ye." He glanced at Mason. "Not the other." He tried to move around her.

"Mason isn't a man." She blocked Gareth's path. "He's a self-centered, selfish jerk. So, you are going to set me free to be with that loser? Thanks, so much."

"I'm leaving. You're crazy anyway!" She heard Mason shut his car door and start his engine, but she didn't take her gaze off Gareth.

Looking agonized, he moved around her again, and this time she fell into step beside him as they both climbed the hill as Mason drove away.

Gareth stopped at the top. "Yer killin' me, lass. Ye know I cannae have ye. Ye were never meant to be mine."

"So that's it? After taking me prisoner, you decide to just set me free? I don't think so."

He gave her a little push. "Go back the way ye came. Go back to yer car and back to life."

She couldn't help it, tears sprang to her eyes. When he saw them, he looked agonized. "Lass, I cannae... you know I cannae..."

A sob burst from her.

He lunged forward, swept her into his arms, and kissed her with all the pent-up emotion she could have ever wished for.

He was kissing her.

He couldn't seem to let her go. He knew that would happen, but she'd just had to keep pushing him, didn't she? And now he was lost, his arms wrapped tight around her, pulling her close against him. He should let her go, but couldn't even find the will to drag his mouth from hers.

The way she clung, her soft lips, the feel of her, even her unexpected temper, made him want to gather her close and keep her forever.

His kiss turned slow and gentle, coaxing her response rather than demanding it. He was under her spell and stopped trying to fight the raw, intense emotions she

drew from him. Mayhap, like Soni, she was a witch, casting enchantments, and binding him in her magic.

If so, he didn't care.

He finally broke off the kiss to bury his face in her neck, to breathe in her feminine scent. His arms tightened possessively. This was impossible. He couldn't actually be in love with her. Could he?

It was just proximity. They'd grown close in the last few days. No one fell in love in such a short period of time.

One hand gathered her honey blonde hair in his fist, and it felt like raw silk against his skin. He inhaled, breathed her into his body, and she smelled of clean, fresh, female. He kissed her throat gently, lingering over her wildly beating pulse.

He gave up.

She *was* his. She thawed him, softened his anger, and turned him into something gentle and tender.

He *did* love her.

He pulled away to stare into her blue eyes, lush with dark lashes. It wasn't just her beauty, though she was beautiful as she looked up at him with a combination of shyness, hope, and fear. He loved her tender heart, her curiosity, her laughter, and her temper as well. She was easy to love.

She would not be easy to leave.

He bent his head to kiss her lush mouth again. "Come with me," he murmured against her lips. "I want to make it to Culloden Moor before Soni comes." He lifted his head. "I need to say goodbye to my brothers."

She nodded quickly and smiled, her lips reddened from his kisses. "Yes. I'll go with you. I'll stay with you for as long as I can."

He pulled her close and buried his face in her neck once more. How was he going to leave her? He breathed out slowly and pulled away to take her hand in his.

"All right. Let's go face the witch."

Chapter 11

Lissa drove slowly with an occasional glance at Gareth, at their clasped hands. Every once in a while he tightened his grip, and she clung in return.

She knew he was leaving, knew she'd simply put off the inevitable. But that hadn't seemed to matter as she'd chased after him. She wanted to be with him as long as possible, she needed to see what happened to him. Otherwise, she'd forever wonder, forever be searching for his face in a crowd.

The slow speed didn't do much good as the miles were eaten up far too quickly.

She wanted to take hold of him, run away, get on an airplane, and cross the ocean before that mean old witch could find him. Okay, so she wasn't old, but she was probably mean. Some teens were and she *was* a witch.

She stifled a giggle. She was worn out, tired, and emotionally drained. She'd be hysterical soon.

She believed Gareth about everything, but couldn't help but wish he was a liar. If he'd lied about the whole thing, she could keep him.

Of course if he'd lied, he'd be in the hospital with a knife wound in his side. Or dead from a car hitting him.

She sighed. He was headstrong, stubborn, and had a temper, but he was a man of honor. It was why Bonnie Prince Charlie's betrayal hurt so much—had festered all these years. Dishonor was incomprehensible to him and deserving of punishment. It was probably why he'd stayed and not moved on.

She wouldn't want him so much if he was otherwise.

Still, she could wish. "Gareth, perhaps we could simply run away?"

"There's no runnin' from this, lass. 'Tis why I'd wanted to spare ye."

"But what if we tried—"

He was already shaking his head. "It would do us no good."

They were getting closer to Culloden Moor. Closer not just to his fate, but to hers. She knew she'd only known him a short while, but how was she supposed to live without him? He'd forever be the man she held against others for comparison. She'd live lonely, alone, missing him forever.

Tears filled her eyes, but she kept staring ahead, hoping he wouldn't notice.

Was it so wrong to want to keep him?

Before she knew it, she was parking in the Culloden Moor Visitors Center parking lot. With her emotions firmly under control, she turned off the car and finally looked at him. "Maybe... maybe we could ask her to make an exception."

He didn't say anything, but she saw the bleakness in his gaze.

"Or at least ask for an extension. From what you said she'll be busy for a long while with so many others. She probably wouldn't care if you hung out a while longer. I don't think you were given enough time."

His lips pressed firmly together as if he forced himself to silence.

"I can go with you."

At that, his expression turned grim. "Never say such a thing. Never wish for death. I know what it is to have life snatched away too soon. Ye're to live the long and hearty life I was denied. Ye're to marry and have children. To fill yer life with laughter and joy. Above all, ye're to live!"

She knew he was right. It wasn't that she was suicidal or anything, but she couldn't imagine having these intense feelings for anyone but him. "Please, let's try! We should drive away and hide. She'll forget all about you."

In response, he opened the door and stood. He rounded the car and opened her door. She was trying not to cry, she didn't want him to remember her like this. She took the hand he offered and climbed out.

"Lock it up, lass. Ye'll not want to lose yer laptop."

Or her camera. She certainly didn't want to lose the pictures she'd taken of him. She covered her possessions with a jacket, locked the door, and checked it.

They walked around the visitors center to head straight out into the field and immediately spotted a slight figure in the distance draped in a black hooded robe. So much for hoping the witch wouldn't be there. In a strange trick of light she seemed to be surrounded by a mist, slightly green in color.

As they approached, Lissa clung to Gareth's big hand with both of hers. The hooded figure turned at their approach to reveal a young, dark-haired beauty, with

a warm and generous smile, and green eyes that held too much experienced for her years.

Lissa recognized her. "I know you. I met you that first day inside the visitors center."

"Aye, ye did."

"You encouraged me to have an adventure. You knew this," she waved a hand, "All of this would happen!"

The girl's smile lit up her face as she shrugged. "We've all jobs to do." She didn't look like an enemy Lissa believed her to be. She looked youthful and happy, glad to see Gareth. It gave Lissa hope.

"Number 26, yer back, I see." The girl's voice was both musical and admonishing. "A little bit late, aye?"

Lissa's two-handed grip on Gareth's hand tightened.

The young girl looked curiously at Lissa, then back at Gareth. "Number 26, have ye done what ye set out to do?" The mist around her seemed to dissipate.

Gareth glanced at Lissa as well. He took a breath, hesitated, and then took another. "Nae. It turns out I'd not the stomach for it. This girl may or may not be related to Bonnie Prince Charlie, but even if she is..."

"Oh, she is."

Gareth closed his eyes and his hands tightened on Lissa. "Be that as it may, I cannae stomach revenge against an innocent."

"And is this yer good turn? Sparin' an innocent?" Again, her tone chided.

Lissa glared at the girl across from her. "Can't you do something? Don't you think he's been punished enough?"

"Where he's to go willnae be a punishment, will it?"

Gareth eyebrows rose. "'Tis not what ye said before."

"Ye're not as ye were before, are ye?"

Gareth took a breath, and shook his head. "I'd like to say goodbye to my brothers before I leave."

The girl shook her head sadly. "As to that, yer brothers are gone off to their own trials."

Gareth let out a breath. He nodded. "I'm glad for them."

Lissa couldn't stand his defeated attitude. What happened to her fiery, fight the whole world, warrior? Well, if he couldn't fight, she could. "Look. You might not want to hear this, but I'm keeping him. That's the end of it. That's the way it's going to be." She tugged on Gareth's hand. "Come on."

"But he isn't yers, is he?"

"He's more mine than yours! And if I married him that would make him mine, wouldn't it?"

"Lass." He sounded agonized.

"I'll fight you for him."

"He's the one who has to choose."

"I choose Lissa." He said the words gratifyingly fast.

The witch shook her head. "'Tis not what I meant, is it, 26?"

Lissa didn't care for how cryptic the little witch was, and didn't like that she called him by a number. "Just say what you mean!"

"Charles Stuart." Was all the witch said.

Lissa looked at Gareth. "What does she mean?"

Gareth looked agonized. He hesitated as he looked at Lissa, his jaw clenching. Finally, he nodded once and his mouth thinned into a determined line. "I give up my revenge." He looked at Lissa when he said it.

Gareth heard gasping from the ghosts. He could clearly see them moving about and whispering to each other. He noted pity, shock, and even fear. For him? Or mayhap for themselves in their pale, ghostly faces. "Doesnae that fact, renouncin' my revenge, change anythin', Soni?"

The witch slowly, sadly, shook her head as glowing green mist swirled about the skirts of her robe. "I'm sorry, Gareth. There's naught I can do for ye."

She'd finally called him Gareth rather than 26. As if the seriousness of the situation demanded his name. The sense of loss he felt at her words weakened his knees and by force of will alone, he remained standing.

"Gareth, I love you." Lissa's voice was filled with pain.

He closed his eyes as his heart expanded, filled. "Ye dinnae need to say such."

"I love you. I do. Don't... don't you have any feelings for me?"

"I've not the right to say so."

There was no response.

He turned, needing to see her face one last time. Her tears almost undid him. "But I cannae stop the words. I do love ye, lass." He opened his arms, needing to touch her one last time and...

Gareth disappeared in a swirling mass of green.

Lissa felt a surge of power and he was gone.

"No!" Pain stabbed through her.

Lissa turned to the witch and the sorrow in the young girl's expression gave her hope. "Please. There must be something you can do. Can't you spare him. Give him back? He's such a good man. He's honorable and kind and he deserves a second chance."

"I'm sorry, lass. 'Tis done."

At that moment she wanted to fight the younger woman for him, drag him back from wherever the girl had sent him. Agonized, she turned away. She swallowed past the lump in her throat and gripped her hands together in a pleading gesture and turned back. She wasn't above begging. "Please. I'm begging you..."

The witch was gone.

A sob exploded from Lissa.

She was all alone at Culloden Moor, and it felt like the loneliest place on earth.

Lissa parked the car and got out. The mountain before her rose high and majestic and the valley before her was covered in green. She barely saw any of it.

She'd spent days staking out Culloden Moor, trying to find the witch, but the little vixen had disappeared.

Then there was the week of despondency, pain, and moping in bed. Laying around and crying had given her nothing but a massive headache.

A phone call from Cara had finally gotten her moving again. She'd poured out her heart about Gareth, omitting the part about him being a ghost. Cara had been

sympathetic, but couldn't understand why Lissa, who was overly-cautious where men were concerned, had fallen so hard and so fast.

Now, Lissa was on her third day of traveling around Scotland alone. She was trying to work again, trying to regain her focus. She needed to keep it together and keep Perry happy so at least one thing would stay positive in her life.

Gareth would definitely approve. He'd want her to move on, honor her commitments.

She missed him so much. What could she have done differently? She kept reliving the moments they'd had together. The moment he disappeared.

She missed everything. His anger, his delight in living again, his concern about his family, the way he'd protected her, and told her he loved her.

Perry wanted to know her impressions of Scotland. *It was full of pain.*

That brought tears to her eyes.

It was full of loneliness.

More tears rose to the surface.

It was full of memories.

She started to cry in earnest.

Perry would just have to accept whatever research she was able to give him.

She literally couldn't stand to be there a moment longer.

She was going home.

Gareth was watching another football game when he heard the front door open.

He froze, then slowly looked over the back of the couch.

Lissa stood motionless in the doorway as, open-mouthed, she stared at him. "Gareth?"

She was breathtaking. Her honey blonde hair held a slight curl and her lovely blue eyes matched the shade of Scotland's blue sky on a sunny day. The ache that had been a part of him since that last day together finally started to ease.

"Gareth? Are you really here?"

The tremor in her voice finally spurred him. He switched off the television, bounded to his feet, rounded the couch and stopped a few feet from her. Would she truly want him here, in her home, in her life. The uncertainty made him snappish. "Where have ye bloody been?"

The house alarm beeped threateningly in the background, just as that wretched witch had said it would when she'd trapped him here.

Lissa followed his gaze, walked to the wall, and pushed buttons that stopped the noise.

"I've been imprisoned by that vile contraption for the last eleven days!"

She turned and warily faced him. "Can... can't ghosts walk through walls?"

He smiled at that and started to relax. She was wide-eyed with surprise, but not uncomfortable with him, or rejecting in any way. "I'm not a ghost, love."

"If you are, can you stay? Can you haunt me forever?"

He chuckled as relief wove its way through him.

She dropped the bags hanging from her shoulders and reached for him all in one movement. "You're real. Your skin is warm." She started to cry.

He wrapped her in his arms and held her tightly as he murmured in her ear. "Tis all right, love. 'Tis to be all right now." Tendrils of her scent washed over him and he inhaled greedily.

"But how?"

"The witch couldnae let the others know they have a chance at a true flesh and blood existence if they but complete the task she sets for them. After I was placed here, Soni came and explained this to me. She also told me I couldnae leave the house or bells would ring and policemen would come to take me away, and I'd never see ye again. So I had to bloody wait for ye to come home. Had a good vacation, did ye? While I was left with naught to do but watch the telly and look out the windows as I waited."

"She couldn't have just told me this?"

His own demeanor darkened. "Apparently she dinnae care if I had plenty of time to brood over the fact that I practically gave ye to that pretty man."

She was still crying even as she laughed.

Gareth leaned down and kissed her.

After a long moment she pulled away. "I thought I'd lost you forever."

"I thought I'd be alone forever. After hundreds of years I never expected the likes of ye." He touched his chest, then hers. "I never expected this."

He kissed her forehead, nose, cheeks, and jaw. "D'ye remember what I said, lass? At Culloden Moor?"

"That you love me."

"Aye. I wondered if ye'd heard me."

She started to cry again, even as she nodded. "Yes. I heard you."

He made a low sound deep in his throat. "Dinnae cry, sweetlin'. We're actually meant to be verra happy."

"Is this real? Or have I gone crazy from days of wishing?"

"Shh." His hands rubbed up and down her arms, his hands soothing, gentle.

Lissa trembled.

"Shush now. 'Twill be all right. Ye'll see."

"Are you really here? To stay I mean."

"If ye'll have me."

"Oh, I'll have you all right."

He held her close for a long moment before leaning back. "Lass, I have naught to offer but myself. I'm scarred, body and mind. I've a temper. I've no wealth. Tis not much of a bargain for ye, and if I was more honorable, I'd give ye up. But I cannae. If ye'll have me, I'll work hard for ye. I'll be faithful until the day I die. I'll love ye forever. So, though I shouldnae ask, I will." He grinned roguishly. "Will ye marry me?"

She clung to him, nodded, and smiled all at the same time. "Yes, Gareth, I'll marry you. Just try and stop me."

Gareth reached up to cup her cheek. "Though I didn't know it, I've waited an eternity for ye, and I'd have waited another if I'd known ye were at the end of it. I'm sure to want forever, lass."

"Yes," she whispered. "Forever."

He lowered his mouth and kissed her tenderly, both a pledge and a promise.

A few months later Gareth pattered around the kitchen while he waited for his wife to come in. The toast popped, and he buttered it, glad for something to do. Something to distract him.

He looked out the window, noted a neighbor waving at him from across the fence, and moved away. He didn't know if he'd ever quite get over it. The people of California were impractical and slightly insane. The neighbors that shunned his wife when she lived with Cara, now clamored to hear him talk and generally made a nuisance of whenever Gareth stepped outside the door. Them and their little dogs.

There are so many people here! It was like ants swarming out of an anthill, it was all the time, and everywhere.

Getting to work was almost always a nightmare.

His phone beeped, and he looked at it to see Ian McGregor had written a text message.

Gareth was getting better at spelling. He'd been able to read and write before, of course, but had to relearn his letters. They'd looked so different in this time.

Ian wanted them to come out for Christmas. *I'll talk to Lissa*, he texted back. He put the phone down so he could pace the kitchen again and wait for his wife.

He loved the fact of it. *His wife*. Smug satisfaction rolled through him at the fact that she was his.

They'd married quickly, within three weeks of her arriving home, though it had seemed slow to him at the time. He'd waited for Ian to come through with some documentation for him. His cousin delivered it himself on the day of the wedding, and Gareth had appreciated the effort. And the fact he'd had family there to stand for him.

Lissa also had an odd group of friends. He did care for some of them. Cara was a bit of sunshine. But most he didn't mind keeping his distance from.

He still didn't know what had happened to his brothers. According to Ian, he'd not spotted a witch when he'd journeyed to Culloden Moor. Gareth might have to go back over there himself—to see if he could get some answers about his kinsmen.

As he'd started a job, it might have to wait until Christmas.

Finding work had been odd to say the least. Lissa had found him work as a model, but he'd found the task ridiculous, and though photographers still called, he refused to answer. When they'd sent him complimentary pictures, he'd been shocked. He didn't look like that! Even if the money was good, he was no pretty man.

A couple of times a week he worked as a bodyguard. He'd thought he would like the task, but so far there'd been no attacks, no excitement, and no fights. He was probably going to quit that job as well.

Lissa had also found him work as a historical assistant, and it was something they generally did together at night. It was his favorite task to date, but it wasn't truly work. She loved asking him questions about Scotland, about the time he'd lived in, grilling him on the answers, and they generally had a wonderful time. Any amount of time in her company, usually led to lovemaking, which was another reason it was his favorite.

His new construction job started on the morrow, and he suspected he might like that well enough. Ian was instructing him on the finer points of land management, and he liked the idea and was already saving money. He'd always wanted to own property, and as he had always been handy, he was hopeful this new job would be beneficial in the long term.

He paced some more.

Lissa finally came out of the bathroom, and he turned at the sound of her feet pattering on the floor.

"Well?"

She shot him a look he didn't quite understand.

"Did ye pee on the wee stick or not?"

She laughed.

"Lissa!"

She held up the stick with a flourish. "The blue line says we're expecting a child."

His breath rushed out of him and his knees went weak as joy rushed through him. He leaned back against the counter for a long moment and tried to collect himself, but he gave up the effort and moved forward to gather her in his arms. "Are ye happy about it?"

"Very."

"I am as well."

"What about mixing my tainted blood with yours? Are you going to be okay with that?"

"Dinnae be thinking of such, lass. I'm at peace with it, and so shall ye be. The man took away much, and I'm sure some of my comrades have made him pay by now." He grinned at the thought. "But we've all blackguards and layabouts in our family tree, haven't we? I'll not hold yer blood against ye, nor the child. It matters not anymore."

She grinned at him. "That's awfully generous of you."

He knew when he was being teased, but didn't want any part of her to believe he'd ever regret. "He took away much, lass. But with yer presence here, he's given me more. I'll not bash him, even if given the chance."

Tears filled her eyes. "Well, I might. For the harm he did you and the others."

He chuckled at that. "I've no doubt ye would. Ye'd probably run him over with yer wee bitty car."

"You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Nae, I dinnae believe I will." He held her for a long while, content to pet her silky hair down her back. "So, tell me, kitten. Are we doing it right?"

"Doing what right?"

"Are we living yer happily ever after?"

She chuckled and pressed a kiss against his chest. "Yes, Gareth." Her arms tightened about his neck as his tightened about her waist. "Yes, we most certainly are."

