

Jamie

The Ghosts of Calloden Moor, #3

by L. L. Muir,

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Table of Contents

Dedication

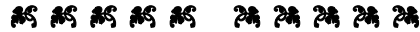
Note



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 18

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This Book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental.



Dedication

To the woman
who brought a copy of *Outlander*
to my little flower shop...
once upon a time.

Note:

Although the individual stories of Culloden's 79 need not be read in strict order, *The Gathering* should definitely be read first to understand what's going on between the Muir Witch and these Highland warriors from 1745.

The Reckoning, Number 79's story, will finish the series.

Chapter 1

Jamie watched Lachlan McLean step close to the young witch and disappear.

As a ghost, the man disappeared all the time, as all of Culloden's 79 did. It was a fact that anytime Jamie's own mind had nothing of much to hold on to, he would fade as well. It was much like falling to—no—*fading* to sleep, he supposed. One moment, he'd be pondering this or that, and the next, he'd feel himself going.

And when next he woke, roused by one strong memory or another—or the stirring of his soul when Soncerae, the witch, was about—he'd find himself in the same position in which he'd awakened that morning after the Battle of Culloden Moor. Awkward, that. Lying on his side with a sword stuck through his middle,

keeping him from rolling forward or back, his legs covered with red mud all the way to his knees. The blade stayed put only because the English blackheart who'd placed it there had no more use for it, since Jamie had cut the man down with his own dirk before breathing his last.

Justice.

He'd been fortunate. Not many found justice that day. But sadly, that justice hadn't been enough to send him on to face God, for there had been a far greater injustice keeping his muddy feet on the moor. And since that injustice could never be undone, he'd been resolved to the idea that he would never be leaving Culloden. Ever.

But that strange Summer Solstice evening, when he'd worried along with the rest that Soni would not come, he was pleased when she'd finally appeared in her odd costume. A long black robe with a hood draped over her hair. For a moment, he wondered if she had the occasion wrong, if she thought it might be Samhain/All Hallows Eve.

However, the wee witch—who was the personal pet of sorts of Culloden's 79—was a clever lass. Not one to mix up her holidays, let alone her seasons.

There was something new between herself and their leader, Number 79. After a spirited conversation between them, which had ended with 79 tramping away from her, she'd drawn them all to her and offered up a bargain, albeit a bargain none of them might have the power to refuse.

He'd expected his turn to come much later, but Soncerae called him forward right away. *Himself. Specifically.* And just after Lachlan had disappeared. It was almost enough to make a lad believe himself a wee bit important.

For once, Lachlan hadn't faded. He'd *gone* somewhere. And Soni was inviting Jamie to do the same.

"Do ye trust me, Jamie?" she said.

What was not to trust? Hadn't the lass become one of the family, so to speak?

"Aye, Soni. I trust that ye've not sent Lachlan to Hell at least."

That won him a bit of laughter from the others, which always pleased him.

"Nay. I've sent him to a pleasant place, though ripe with opportunities for a man to prove his worth. So?" She grinned at him with a twinkle of white firelight and a flash of green in her eyes from the strange swirl of emerald light that moved around her—a fence of sorts that he would never attempt to cross. "What do ye say, Jamie? Are ye game? Will ye do a noble turn for the chance to face Charles Edward Stuart and say yer piece?"

Vent my anger on the prince and give up stalking the moors of Culloden forever?

He gave a sharp nod. "Aye. And happily. Though I'd prefer to send the bonny prince back here to haunt the place for a few hundred years."

More laughter bubbled behind him and he noticed he had already moved forward to stand within Soni's reach. It was all happening too fast! A light touch of panic caught him by the chest and he turned to take one last look at the field in which he'd spent two and a half centuries. Did he dare leave it? Truly?

But he couldn't see the field, even if it had been light enough to do so. A wall of relatively solid ghosts surrounded him. Familiar faces all. They'd begun as strangers united in Scotland's cause. They'd continued as like-minded spirits tortured by the failings of a leader they'd believed in. But now, they were ending

alone, to be sent off, one at a time, just as they'd risen that 17th day of April, 1745.

When Jamie pulled himself off the ground that morning long ago, wee Rabbie stood nearby with his dog.

"Ye're Number 64," the laddie said. "Sixty-three of us have already climbed from our graves, aye? What do ye suppose it means?"

Jamie looked at the other Highlanders about him, unable to imagine what might happen next, when another body rose from the ground twenty yards away. Rabbie and the dog padded off, presumably to give the man his number, and Jamie became just another ghost standing above the fallen, waiting for someone to explain why their spirits were being gathered.

Called by no voice, but called together just the same.

More Highlanders rose to join them. All young. All too young. Though all death was tragic, it seemed more so that morning when every one of them was in his prime, but for Rabbie, whose presence only exaggerated the tragedy.

Jamie was a bit nervous when Number 79 rose and joined them. A captain, he was, with shoulders broader and his form taller than even the largest among them. An easy target to be sure. But also a leader born. No rank required.

While the big man surveyed the ghosts before him, they waited for the next to rise. From that moment onward, however, the bodies of soldiers lying in rows only moved when the Grave Detail moved them. No more spirits joined their number.

Jamie couldn't have said why there hadn't been eighty, or seventy-eight of them who rose that morning. There was no rhyme or reason to it, but it was a fine mystery to ponder on the odd night when a ghostie felt particularly restless, in no hurry to *fade* back to sleep again.

There were mysteries a' plenty at Culloden of course. For instance, why were they all drawn to Soni when she was but a wee bairn? And why were they all instantly awakened each and every time she returned? Why did the other ghosts take no notice of her? Why were they somehow apart?

And what about the connection that existed between their Soni and 79?

There was something that went unspoken about the man. Soni seemed to sense it too. In fact, she often went walking with the big, pale-haired Highlander, sometimes for the whole of her visit.

What could they have spent so much time discussing? And if Jamie hadn't been imagining it, 79 had been able to kiss the lass in truth! Just a wee while ago! Though surely their lips, being of different realms, could never have truly touched. Could they?

But there was no more time to ask questions. There was nothing at all to say to the rest of Culloden's 79. It was time for Jamie to prove he was at least brave enough to go.

"Let's be about it then," he shouted, as much to bolster his courage as to preserve his dignity with the others.

"I would caution ye, Jamie," Soni said quietly.

A small frown marred her brow but none of the rest were close enough to have seen it. Not even 32 who stood nearest. He was forever tilting his head to the side, trying to hear better. But that concern on her face was for Jamie alone. And it was enough to turn his blood chill—if he'd had any blood to turn.

She waved him nearer. “Dinna wander far, aye?”

“Dinna wander far?” he whispered. “Far from where, lass?”

“Dinna wander far *from home*, Jamie... until I come for ye.” Her smile was suddenly bright—a facade, he realized. “God go with ye, Jamie Houston.”

Far from *home*?

Can she truly be sending me to Kinkelding?

And whether he willed it or not, he went.

Chapter 2

Culloden was stripped from Jamie, or rather, he was violently stripped from Culloden. A neat trick for a man who had nothing solid about him.

Or at least, when he started, he’d been intangible.

A range of surprisingly physical things shifted inside him, but the first was his stomach. He was never one for wild rides in a wagon or faring well on the water. His belly wasn’t meant for such things and always gave him fits. If he’d known what lay beneath him, he might have enjoyed the relief of emptying his gullet. But he dared not do anything more than hang onto his dignity and hope the sensations ended soon.

And praise God, they did.

He was suddenly standing on solid ground again, still in the dark, with his body balanced over his feet. He held his hands out in front of him, prepared to catch himself as the weight of real blood pumped through his person as it hadn’t done for two hundred and seventy years.

The heart in his chest boomed and whooshed with the power of a great set of bellows he might have found in the hands of a blacksmith. And so warm was his blood, it too might have come from a smithy.

But it wasn’t the heat of his blood, nor the force of it pushing through his veins that struck him dumb. It was the simple fact that he could feel it at all!

He was a man again! Warm blood, strong heart, weak stomach, and all of it welcome.

“Thank ye, Soncerae,” he whispered and hoped she could somehow hear him. “Bless ye, lassie.”

He breathed deeply and pulled familiar smells across his tongue and into his belly. Heather. Grass. The familiar smells of hay and horse. He was a great hand with the horses back in his lifetime. He’d been called upon to soothe Lord Lovat’s beasts just a few days—Nay, it had been centuries before.

Jamie closed his eyes and shook his head, hoping his memories would all settle back into the proper order.

Horses. There were horses nearby. And though the night sky wasn’t much darker than it had been over Culloden a minute ago, he knew just where he was!

Kinkelding.

He asked God to bless Soni Muir yet again for being so kind as to send a lad home.

The knoll that sat against the sky could be none other than his own. He'd perched upon it most evenings after his mother thought him abed. But she had to have known that he slept there on fine nights because she would fling the door open and call him to breakfast. If she thought he was still in his bed, she would have hiked the stairs and when she'd found him gone, she'd have bellowed out the window.

And if that was his wee knoll, set against the night sky, then... He turned slowly, not daring to hope that his family home still stood at his back.

In spite of his lack of faith, there it loomed. Kinkeld House. A fine manor for raising two lads and a lassie. A pale, hulking, three-storied house of tan stone waited for the morning sun to rise over Dunain Hill and reveal the manor's golden hue.

Home!

His sudden dizziness reminded him that in his present form, he did indeed need to breathe.

The West tower still stood, though a few stones seemed to be missing from the parapet. The shadow of the largest barn that had once stood off to the left was missing as well. A large, silent fountain stood in the center of the drive blocking his view of the front door to the house. No water splashed from it, and there were small lights shining up at the piece from the ground giving the flowers and figures a menacing aspect.

He promised himself that it wouldn't matter if the English now lived within the walls of Kinkeld House. It was gift enough to see the place whole one more time before leaving this earth once and for all in a day or two.

The heaviness of his new body weighed at him, made him long for the sleep that had eluded him for all those years since Culloden. So he set off toward the top of his knoll.

After all, Soni had bid him to stay put, had she not? And in the dead of night, there seemed to be nothing awake at all, let alone someone who required an heroic deed. In order to earn his meeting with the prince and rid his gut of the bile and anger that still simmered there, he was required to prove his worth, and had a day or two to do it. Afterward, whether he wished it or not, he would move on to that other side of this life.

But not yet. Now he wanted true, revitalizing sleep.

Jamie settled his backside on the thick grass and looked once more at the tower. He could clearly imagine Elspeth standing at the top of it, her white shift blowing out around her, her pleading hand raised in his direction. But if it had truly been the ghost of her, she'd have been reaching out toward the road, not his knoll.

He shook away the wishful thinking with the toss of his head and stretched his still-lanky body out along the crest of the hill, on his side. He bent a knee to keep from rolling to the base in his sleep since the saber that usually propped him up was missing from his middle. It was a strange sensation, having such a nuisance missing after all that time.

His arm was pillow enough. The air was cool and his plaid was more of a comfort to him than it had been on the moor.

Home.

The perfect gift. Almost like... justice.

And with that sweet word echoing in his mind, he drifted off to sleep without fading in the least. His dreams, however, were no more easy than they had been at Culloden. They brought him little refreshment at all.

A woman came to him, whispering frantically. Her voice hissed in his ear, close as could be, but he couldn't understand a word. Absently, he waved her away in case she was just a midge. It wouldn't be the first time one of the tiresome insects had chased him off his knoll and driven him back inside the house.

Aware of his surroundings, even half asleep, he considered going indoors to find his bed. But then he remembered *when* he was, and that the inside of Kinkeld House was not his. Neither would any bed be, even if he found a way to get through a locked door.

"Soni," he muttered. "Would ye send this besom away from me?"

He heard a small gasp and it brought him instantly awake. Sitting up straight, he looked about. But there was nothing on the hill except one weary Scotsman, recently returned from the dead.

Nothing stirred around the house. And no ghostie, real or imagined, reached out to him from the tower. The moon was just rising in the East, adding its bit of light to the stars. And though he held perfectly still, nothing returned to buzz in his ear.

He smiled at the idea of Soni defending him from winged things, but knew she was probably too occupied, sending Highlanders this way and that.

Again, he stretched out upon the knoll and flexed his muscles, enjoying the pull of them beneath his skin. He drank in the smell of grass and moss, and the fragrance of horses in the distance... and slept uninterrupted for the rest of the night.

Chapter 3

Jamie woke to the sound of car wheels crunching on the pebbled drive that surrounded the fancy fountain. Like the thousands of times he'd been stirred awake on the battlefield, he sat up and waited to learn what had awakened him, hoping for something interesting.

Two new gates hadn't been visible in the dark. One stood at the far end of the long drive at the point where the property ended at the road, and another one at the close end of it. Three white vans drove around the fountain—the features of which were far less menacing in the daylight—and made their way back out of the gate. They stopped half way to the road, pulled to the side, and parked.

Are they lost?

The doors exploded out and a small horde of mortals emerged. Some carried large bits of camera equipment Jamie remembered seeing on the many occasions film crews had come to Culloden. Two men loaded cables onto each other's shoulders while others started back toward the house.

A film crew at Kinkelding?

He stared at the building bathed in the orange and yellow glow of morning and had to admit, after all those years, the structure was still impressive, albeit smaller than the wondrous place of his memories. The decorative stones above and below the larger windows sagged some, making the façade appear more like that of an old woman instead of the firm face of youth.

Still, it was in far better condition than the Leanach Cottage that still stood on Culloden's field. That landmark wasn't made of stone, however, so even though it had been well cared for, it sagged like an old broom out in the weather for ages.

But not Kinkeld House. His home would stand another two hundred years, surely. And if the owners cared enough about the place to add the elaborate fountain in the drive, they had to be taking fine care of the house as well.

He nodded with pride. The Houston descendants would have had a fine home for a good long while. Or at least, the offspring of some other Houston...

His mind began to wander down a road of regret but his thoughts were interrupted.

"Hiya!"

A bloke stood at the base of the fountain looking up at him and Jamie's heart raced at the shock of it. Only Soni and wee bairns were ever able to see him, and no one had hailed him for ages.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "Did I say that wrong? Everyone in town has been saying Hiya, but maybe it doesn't mean what I thought it did."

A yank then.

Jamie nodded while he waited for his heart to settle.

"Hello," he finally said. "Ye said it just fine."

"Are you Mr. Houston? Here to let us inside?"

Jamie stood and brushed the back of his kilt while he strode down the hillock. "I am Jamie Houston, aye. But this is no longer my family's home, I'm sorry to say."

"Oh, well." The fellow smiled and held out his hand. "I thought you looked a lot younger than the guy on the phone." The yank looked around, then gave Jamie a smile. "Either he's late or we're early. I'm Dawson Griggs."

Two others who were not burdened with heavy equipment came to join them and held out their hands for a good shake. Dawson introduced them.

"This is Matt and Tuke." He pointed to his friends. Matt was a young, darkly tanned fellow with only a short fuzz of gold hair on his head. Tuke was a little older than the other two with long curly hair—dreadlocks, they were called.

"Did you say this place used to belong to your family?" asked the latter.

"Auch, aye," Jamie said, proud to claim that truth. "I was raised here."

"Really?" Tuke seemed pleased to hear it and pulled a small notebook and pen from his many pockets. "So you probably have all kinds of stories you can tell us about the Houston Ghost?"

Jamie choked on his spittle. "The what?"

Dawson and Matt exchanged a nervous glance.

Tuke's brows slammed down hard. "Now, don't tell me we've come all this way and there are no ghosts here. We did our research—"

Jamie held out both hands and eased them up and down as if soothing a troubled beast. "Calm ye doon," he said. "There is a ghost here." He was surprised

he could manage to say it with a sober face. "I can, in all honesty, tell ye that there is a spirit here at this very moment. It's just that... I'd never thought of it as the *Houston* Ghost afore."

The three immediately relaxed.

Jamie wondered if it might be exciting to see how much fun he might have with a bunch of ghost hunters now that they were able to see him. On the moor, he got no pleasure from it at all. In fact, it had always insulted him to have folks call themselves mediums and demand that the dead of Culloden rise up and speak—like dogs performing tricks for a wee treat.

The spirits he knew had more important matters on their minds than the entertainment of strangers. Although, at the moment, he marveled that he'd been able to busy himself for so many years.

Perhaps it was the simple fact that Jamie wasn't currently a ghost that made him feel mischievous once again. After all, he had mortal time on his hands, and the matters that occupied his mind while haunting Culloden didn't seem so pressing that morning, perhaps because his revenge was close at hand.

A few drops of excitement in his blood was a heady thing indeed and he decided he wanted more. A great deal more. And though the trio was obviously expecting some entertainment to be had at Kinkeld House, little did they know that *they* would be the ones providing it.

"How do you know?" Matt fumbled with a pocket and pulled out a small machine of some sort and started pointing it in different directions. Jamie had seen something similar in the hand of a man who was measuring the temperature around the grave markers. "I mean, how do you know the ghost is here now?"

Jamie grinned. "Because *I* am here now." The honest truth, surely. And Jamie Archibald Houston was nothing if not honest.

Dawson's attention snapped to. "And this ghost *likes* you or something?"

Jamie nodded, but allowed the man to interpret it how he would. He'd not lied, for he liked himself fine.

Matt moved his gadget closer to Jamie's person and peered intently at the little screen. But since Jamie was as warm as the rest of them, he doubted the machine would detect any sudden drop in temperature.

"Well, if the ghost likes you..." Tuke looked him over from head to toe, from toe to head, then grinned as well. "How would you like to be on tv?"

"Are you kidding me?" Matt showed his screen to the other two and they all turned to look at him with wide eyes.

Tuke put his hands together as if praying. "Please say you'll help us."

Jamie could just imagine how tickled his fellow ghosties would be to look over some youngster's shoulder only to find his familiar mug on a small screen. If, in fact, any of his fellows were still on the moor to see it...

But no matter. He'd still enjoy rattling his chains for the yanks who seemed so desperate to be frightened.

He grinned until his thought his cheeks might tear. "Of course I'll help." And perhaps, in the doing, he'd find a noble deed that wanted doing.

Brace yerself, Yer Majesty! He wished the young prince would somehow hear his warning and know that an angry Highlander would soon be on his way to have words with him.

Chapter 4

A small blue car turned off the main motorway and headed down the long drive. Inside it was likely to be this Houston relative come to let the film folk in.

Jamie waved a hand to gain the attention of his new friends. "I think it best if ye doona mention my... *relationship to the ghost* to this man. Neither should ye let on that I'm a relative. Bad blood and all that."

"Oh? Well, sure," Dawson said. "I'll just tell him you're Jamie, an historical consultant. How's that?"

"Fine then. Just fine." Jamie only hoped the history of which they needed consulting dated back before 1745. After that, he only knew what he'd seen on small television screens and mobile telephones.

The blue car stopped next to the fountain. Inside it was a wrinkled, weather-worn man with a shock of white hair over each ear. He climbed out of the vehicle with the help of a cane that appeared as knobby and weather-worn as himself.

"Hello there. Hello," he said to Dawson, who stood beside the car's open door and offered the old man a hand. He waved it away. "I've a cane, laddie. I'm not dead." His smile never wavered. "Hello," he said again to Matt and Tuke. Then his brows rose skyward when he got a look at Jamie. "Would ye look at that, would ye? Some fine piece of work ye are, me boy." He glanced around dramatically in concern. "Dinna let me wife have a gander at that fine Goldenrod kilt or I'll lose her to ye fer certain!" He raised his knee to give it a slap, and laughed with no care whether he laughed alone.

Dawson looked nervous. "This is, uh, Jamie. He's our historical advisor for this job."

The old man's head bobbed heartily. "Just call me Huey. And a fine advisor I would think with a Great Kilt like that. Oh, I say." He hobbled closer so he could finger the weapons and gadgets hanging from Jamie's belt. "Ye see these?" He spoke over his shoulder to the others. "Flints at the ready. Ooh, and he's got authentic tools, here, do ye see? Back during the '45, he'd have had to melt his own shot and use these to cut away the seam." He winked up at Jamie, then frowned rather suddenly. "Do we ken each other, laddie?"

Jamie gave his head a shake.

The man grunted then turned away. "Shall we go in, then?" He pulled some keys from his pocket and headed for the front door. "I don't suppose our ghost will come outside to greet ye." He laughed gleefully as if he'd made the most humorous comment.

The four of them gathered just inside the door. The cameras and crew were left outside for the time being.

"What we plan to do this morning is to get some clear shots of the house to edit in later," Dawson explained. But then his ramblings became a low drone in the background while Jamie soaked in the sight of his beloved home.

Nothing was out of place.

The doorways and rooms had not been changed at all. The paper on the walls was not from the 18th century, but some of the paneling was original. The railing had been changed, but the ornately carved newel posts were all too familiar.

In reverent awe, he sat on the first landing and ran his hands over the leaves and stems. He'd stood at his father's hip while the man carved each and every detail. He learned how to hold his father's tools, learned what a soft strike of the mallet would do in comparison to a firm one. How the wood chips fell away as if they'd been asked kindly to do so. The pattern inside was slowly uncovered, as if it had been there all along, waiting for the right man to come reveal it to the world.

Without thought, his fingers found the leaf that was a bit smaller than the rest. His father had allowed him to chisel that one detail, and he'd struck too hard. There'd been no way to fix it, and yet his father claimed it gave the post character. "Variety is best," he'd said. "Else why would God have made us all different, even from our brothers?"

The old man tapped the floor with his cane. "Jamie, lad. Are ye coming?"

The party moved farther into the heart of the house and he was forced to leave his memories for the moment. But he was determined, if his noble deed didn't take him away before morning, he would return and give the posts the adoration they deserved.

The bedchambers on the main floor were furnished with cheap velvet coverings over cheaper bed frames. The photographs on the walls were of no one he knew. The master bedchamber held not a trace of his parents.

Though it was a barren cavern of stone walls, the kitchen was packed to the rafters with memories of his mother, aunts, and grandmother bending to their work, laughing at familiar stories, and murmuring appreciation for the taste of a well-made recipe. He could almost see them dancing about—for their movements had been like dancing—a room full of women moving fine but heavy laden dishes from table to table without bumping into one another. And all done with smiles on their faces.

His mother's kitchen had indeed been a happy place. And he remembered well the sad year he became too large and gangly to be allowed inside, once that dancing began. He'd bumped into his grandmother and sent her tumbling. After that, he'd sorely missed dipping a piece of shortbread into the clotted cream...

He'd become just another of the menfolk who had to wait at the table for his meal to be served. Only it was worse for him—he knew that not all of the delicious things in the kitchens made it to the table.

When he asked his mother about it, she gave him a riddle instead. "If Suisan likes treacle tarts best, Suisan gets the biggest tart."

He'd held a certain malice toward his sister Suisan ever since. But later, of course, he'd come to understand that he was given certain privileges himself because his mother knew what it meant to him. And his annoyance with his sister paled.

What he wouldn't give to see Suisan again, learning those dance steps in the kitchen. He could almost see her...

A dark-haired lass in a white nightdress appeared at one end of the kitchen and paced to the other, wringing her hands as she went. "I dinna ken. I canna remember." Then again. "I dinna ken. I canna remember."

“Suisan?” The name tripped off his tongue before he thought about his ghost hunting companions.

The lass turned to face him. Her eyes flew wide and she screamed. She fainted, but before Jamie could reach her, she disappeared altogether. But her shriek still echoed against the bare stones.

A ghost? Truly?

“What in the hell was that?” Tuke’s voice fell like a heavy stone to the floor.

Dawson gave his friend a pointed look. “Tell me you were recording.”

Wide-eyed, Matt stood with his hands held out, like he expected the walls to start moving in to crush him. “Dude,” he said. Then he repeated himself half a dozen times before Dawson told him to shut up.

Tuke let loose a disgusted sigh. “No, we weren’t recording anything. Okay?”

He and Dawson exchanged a look, then the latter turned that look on Jamie. “Do you think you can get her to come back again?”

The old man poked his head in the kitchen. He’d been to the water closet. “Dinna fash, laddies. She’ll not be likely to show herself until dark, now will she? And sometimes in the wee hours, just as the horizon turns a pale shade of blue.”

Either the flush of the toilet had covered the sound of the scream, or the man’s hearing was questionable.

He motioned for them to come. “I’ll show ye upstairs, to the solar. Something there ye’ll want to see.”

Tuke and Dawson shared a knowing glance with Jamie, then followed Huey out, but they peeked back over their shoulders as they went, searching the far wall. Matt shook his head and hurried after them. The young man was terrified—which might prove to be a problem given his career, searching for ghosts on a daily basis.

As for Jamie, he couldn’t quite make his feet move, still shaken by the female ghostie. It hadn’t been his sister Suisan, no matter how much he would have liked to see her face again. The dark hair had given him hope, but just a flash of the lass’s face had crushed his chest like a mishandled caber.

He now knew who it was that haunted Kinkeld House. And the ghost hunters were wrong—she wasn’t a Houston.

At least she hadn’t been... as late as April of 1745...

Chapter 5

The lass never presented herself again even though Jamie waited alone in the kitchen for as long as he could. Eventually, he had to give in to the calls from the men upstairs or explain why, and he didn’t feel like getting into such intimate details with Huey, let alone the yanks. Besides, the history of the house was being sorely exaggerated by the old man, and Jamie wanted to amend the truth as much as he could, especially if the telly folk were presenting it all as fact.

Thankfully, after a long lecture about the foolishness of the Jacobites—which Jamie longed to counter—Huey’s energy began to wane.

“If ye’ll follow me, laddies,” he puffed and gasped down the hallway, “I’ll show ye the face of the man who haunts the graveyard beyond the gardens.”

More spirits?

Jamie had been confident he was the closest thing to a ghost present when he’d been teasing the film crew. But not only had he seen Elspeth’s ghost in the kitchens, there was apparently another in the family graveyard! And though he’d learned the fine art of patience over the years, he could hardly wait until nightfall to discover who else he might be able to speak to once again.

It was possible, sadly, that the ghost in the graveyard could be anyone else who’d died at Kinkelding in the centuries since he’d lived there—for he knew of no ghosts roaming around in his childhood. And if he did not know this new ghost, so be it. It was enough of a boon to be allowed to see Elspeth again.

If he was still around after dark and was able to speak with her... He couldn’t imagine what he could he have done in his past to deserve such a reunion! It was a wish he couldn’t have dared wish.

Did Soni know his heart so well then? The thought made him nervous. What else might the witch have in store for him?

Soni’s warning repeated for the tenth time. *Stay close to home. Stay close...*

Aye, it was easy advice to follow, easiest he’d ever been given. But he would stay wary, just the same.

The small company moved to the end of the hall, away from the portraits of Houston ancestors, or rather, descendants he’d never known, and into the solar—the room where his family had gathered every evening of Jamie’s rather short life. He stepped across the threshold and his eyes flew immediately to the far wall where his father’s elaborately carved chair had always stood. His heart leapt to see that it still existed after so many years. The worn bits were much more worn than before, the color all but gone from the thick bar where his own feet had rested when he was a boy playing at “Laird of the Manor.”

But his father had needed no bar on which to rest his feet. He’d been as tall and lanky as Jamie turned out to be.

“That chair was built and carved in this very room,” the old man explained, noting Jamie’s interest.

“I ken it,” Jamie muttered, his pride preventing him from holding his tongue. He’d watched his father make the chair as well.

“It’s too big to get out the door or the windows, and none of the owners of the house had the heart to cut the thing in half.”

Praise God.

Jamie closed the distance and slid his backside onto the seat of it, pleased to see that it fit him the same as it had fit his father. His feet remained on the floor, or at least his toes did.

The old man sputtered. “Ye canna sit in it man. Have ye not read the signs posted all about the house? No touching the furnishings, aye?”

Jamie begged pardon but took his time getting to his feet. And silently, he promised his father’s chair that he would return later.

“Now,” the old man slipped back into his easy tour guide skin. “The manor is called Kinkeld House, but the area around it is called Kinkelding. Translated directly, it refers to the people of the area, not the area itself. And if ye’ll turn yer

attention to the portrait above the mantle, ye'll see the Kinkelding man who haunts the graveyard. I've see him meself, I'm not ashamed to admit. Late at night. A special tour group of Americans—" He turned from the painting and showed the whites of his eyes. "Weel, I'll be jiggered!" His face paled as he glanced from the painting to Jamie and back again.

Jamie looked up hoping to see the face of his father, for who else would a son like to see again, after two hundred seventy years, but the man who made him a man himself?

His heart stuttered.

He had to allow that his father's face bore a striking resemblance to the man in the portrait. But it wasn't Archibald Houston in the painting...it was Jamie Archibald Houston!

Two things confused him, however.

Firstly, how had anyone remembered Jamie's face so well they might paint such an accurate likeness after he'd left for war? And secondly, if he had been haunting Culloden all those years, how could he possibly be haunting the family graveyard?

His confusion would have to wait, however, because a certain old man was having a difficult time keeping his feet beneath him...

Chapter 6

Glaring up at Jamie from where he'd fallen on the floor, Huey demanded to know who he was.

"A direct descendant, obviously, of James Houston, who was killed in the Battle of Culloden Moor." It grated on his soul to lie, even a little, but he had no choice. Telling the old man the truth might prove to be too much of a shock and he couldn't take the risk.

"I knew I recognized ye in the drive." The man's frown suddenly changed to a hopeful smile. "For a nominal fee, I'll be happy to give ye a guided tour of the grounds later tonight..."

Jamie shook his head and he helped the man to his feet. The only thing that would remove himself from Kinkelding that night would be Soni, come to tell him the prince was ready to see him. Otherwise, he'd roam the place as he pleased and ferret out whatever ghosts lingered on the property.

"He's with us, remember?" Dawson gave the old man a stern stare. "And we've booked the place until tomorrow morning. Jamie will be touring the graveyard with *us*." He turned to glare at Tuke. "And the cameras and equipment will be recording. Now let's make sure that happens."

Tuke and the old man left the room and Dawson put a hand on Jamie's chest to hold him back.

"Look man," he said quietly. "I'll pay you for your time, and I'll pay you well if everything works out tonight. I mean, if we get some good stuff on film—"

"Nay." Jamie shook his head. "No need to pay me. I'll stay as long as I am able, but I cannot tell how long that may be."

The man's face lightened a bit. "That's great. As long as you can, that's all I ask." And with that, he all but danced from the room.

Jamie turned again to face his likeness. There were aspects that reminded him of his father so much he could hear the rumble of the man's voice still in his head. And in spite of the fact that he also resembled his brother, Ian, the painting was clearly meant to be of himself.

He didn't recognize the name of the painter, but his heart stuttered again and actual tears filled his frail mortal eyes when he read the brass plate at the base of the ornate frame.

James Archibald Houston. Our Jamie, lost at Culloden, found in our hearts.

But what about Ian?

When Jamie had risen from the dead the morning after the battle, he'd looked for his brother and not found him. His spirit was not among Culloden's 79, so he'd hoped with all his might that Ian had survived. But there had been so very many who had fallen.

So many bodies that might have been Ian's. But instead of look for him, he'd clung to the hope that his brother had been able to flee.

After some time, news trickled back, conversations were overheard and passed on. The Butcher had sent his murderers into the Highlands, to finish off all those who had dared to fight for Charles Edward Stuart. So if his brother had survived the battle itself, he might not have survived the horror of what followed.

There came a point when the anguish of not knowing was simply too much to bear. And from that moment on, he'd had no choice but to put the fate of his family aside, to stop wondering. To stop feeling.

It had been far too easy a task.

And until Soni showed up at Culloden, blinking at them all between folds of blankets, he'd probably gone right on, not feeling, forever.

Now, thanks to the wee witch, he was feeling again. Not just the movements and reactions of his body, but the fears and worries that had lain dormant in his heart. The moors in his chest had begun to thaw, and minute by minute, he became more alive with emotion.

Heaven help him, if he didn't get his wild thoughts under control, he might find himself on the ground, drowning in a pool of his own tears!

Ian. He must at least learn what happened to Ian!

If there was a portrait commissioned for himself, then a portrait of his brother might tell him if and where he brother might have fallen. Perhaps somewhere in the house... If the owners kept his, it would stand to reason they would keep Ian's.

Jamie stomped out into the hallway and began his search, but after scouring every room, he found nothing of his brother. He began to marvel that he'd seen anything at all of his own family when so many Houstons and others had lived and died in Kinkeld House.

His only hope was that Huey might know something. A glance out the window showed the old man climbing back into his blue car, and Jamie ran as fast as his recently animated legs could take him, to catch up with the man.

Just as the car rounded the fountain, Jamie knocked on the glass on the passenger side. The car stopped. Huey rolled down the window and the hope on his face might have been for an extra coin. But Jamie had nothing for him.

“Please. Can ye tell me,” Jamie said breathlessly, “if ye remember anything more about James Houston? Or more importantly, do ye ken what happened to the brother who also fought at Culloden? Or,” dare he ask, “what happened to the rest of the family?”

The man sighed, realizing he was being offered nothing as compensation for his contributions. “Aye. The brother, Ian, fought at Culloden as well. But he surrendered. He was tried and transported to the colonies. It is the ghost of their sister who haunts the house and tower. I believe she jumped to her death.”

Jamie nodded and let the man leave.

No. Suisan would never have done such a thing. Suisan, with her hearty laughter and teasing ways. He missed her more than he ever would have imagined in his youth. He only hoped the lass didn't greet too much when he was unable to come home again.

He already knew the female ghost was not his sister, so that meant it was Elspeth who had jumped from the tower. A massive weight descended upon him at the news, as if it was his fault the lass had killed herself. He'd obviously made little difference on the battlefield, but he might have made a difference at Kinkelding.

Poor Elspeth. No wonder she haunts the place.

Had she found it too horrible a prospect that Ian had been sent to the colonies? Had she been distraught at the idea of raising his child without him? Surely, Jamie's parents would have taken her in and cared for her and the bairn, whether or not Ian had married her. So why?

His sorrow for Elspeth warred with his joy that Ian had survived, not only Culloden, but the slaughter that came afterward. His brother had ever had good fortune. After all, he'd won Elspeth's heart... Unfortunately, she hadn't been quite so dear to Ian.

He stopped suddenly, understanding dawning like the sun rising over Dunain Hill.

His noble deed. A damsel in honest distress was Elspeth! He must have been sent to help her move on to the next world. If she still waited for Ian to come home, she waited in vain. All Jamie needed to do was help her understand, get her to cross over, and he will have proven himself. His long awaited revenge would be at hand!

As soon as the sun was down, he'd do something he never would have imagined.

One of Culloden's 79 was going ghost hunting.

Chapter 7

Matt and Tuke ordered about their small film crew and filled the house with equipment. They were diligent in their planning, keeping the gadgets and cables well to one side of a given room, hanging microphones out of view of the cameras. They'd done the same with the vans outside, parking well away from the house so wide shots could be filmed of a lonely, deserted house fronted by an equally lonely fountain.

They filmed his knoll for a bit, then climbed to the top and filmed down upon the house from that height. They filmed Jamie standing just outside the door. They filmed him wandering the rather modern gardens with his hands behind his back like the laird of the manor surveying his domain.

If he truly had been laird of the manor, however, he would have seen to it that most of the flowers in the garden were replaced by useful food stuffs.

Dawson and the rest kept him away from the family graveyard and asked him not to go inside the house until after dark. If he was going to arouse the ghosts, they wanted to be there to witness it. And if it was dark, they hoped to be better able to capture it on film.

Jamie was simply grateful they didn't expect him to wander about the place moaning, pretending to be the ghost of himself, since he was already dressed for the part.

In the afternoon, a woman delivered supper. She assembled a table and covered it with a crisp white cloth and all manner of delights. Only then did Jamie realize the sharpest ache in his gut was not for Elspeth and his long lost family, but for food.

When Dawson insisted Jamie join the rest of the crew and eat his fill, he could have wept for joy.

"Believe me," his new friend said, "it's going to be a long night and you won't last on an empty stomach."

He especially enjoyed the crisps covered in salt, and with Dawson's permission, he tucked a small bag of them into his sporran for a later snack. He recognized tablet as something the tourists purchased in the Culloden shop and tried it. But it was far too rich for his palette and he spit it out for fear of tossing up the rest of what he'd eaten.

To taste again! Thank ye, Soncerae!

The food-woman left behind the uneaten things in a sack, packed up her table and baskets and left. There was nothing more to do but wait for nightfall, so the men wandered off in search of a place to relax for a bit. Jamie returned to his knoll, but instead of stretching out and sleeping away any more of his precious mortal time, he thought back to the day he'd left his beloved Kinkeld House.

He'd stumbled out of the front door in the wee hours and looked for Ian. When he reached the corner, he heard his father and brother speaking low. With his sight all but gone, Archie Houston's hearing was keen indeed. No doubt he'd heard them stirring and came outside to bid them farewell. But his next words kept Jamie from showing himself.

"No son of mine could be so cruel," his father said. "Marry the lass today, Ian. Join Lord Lovat's regiment tomorrow."

"Nay, da. I am needed now, and so is Jamie."

“Ye’re needed here. Give us an hour or two to summon the priest and wake yer mither.”

“No need to wake Mither. I...” His brother paused, but he couldn’t have been distracted by Jamie, tucked well around the corner of the house as he was.

“What is it, son?”

Ian let go a gusty sigh. “I doona mean to marry the lass.”

There was a longer pause while Jamie’s brain caught up with what had been said. It came as no surprise that his brother didn’t mean to marry Elspeth. Nor did it shock him that his brother had likely gotten the lass with child. What amazed him was that Ian would admit such a thing to their father—a man to whom honor meant all.

“No son of mine—”

“I’m a son of Scotland now,” Ian hissed. Then he stomped out of the yard and onto the drive. “Tell Jamie to hurry or I’ll go without ‘im!”

His father found Jamie then. His head cocked to the side, likely drawn to the sound of his son’s breathing. They were both too embarrassed by Ian’s actions to face each other directly.

“Go wi’ God, Jamie my boy. And watch yer back...for I fear Ian cannot be trusted to do it for ye.” The tall man pulled him tight in his embrace and choked the air out of him, then walked away, his thin cane tapping its way half-heartedly toward the front door.

Jamie wiped his eyes and bore down to keep from weeping like a lass. After all, he was on his way to join the Jacobite army, to represent the family in his father’s stead. With his and Ian’s help, God’s chosen prince would be back on the throne where he belonged.

And Ian wouldn’t wait for him to wipe his nose and bid the womenfolk farewell.

His brother was half way to the road by the time Jamie caught up with him. Ian slapped him on the back and gave him a shove like he’d often done. Jamie shoved him back, proving he was his brother’s equal in all things. They tussled to the end of the drive, then sobered. Just before they took that first step into soldierly adventure, they turned to look back at Kinkeld House. A farewell glance at a place they knew, deep inside, they might not ever see again.

The eastern sky was changing from palest blue to pale yellow. The corner of the house lightened with it. The top of the west tower shone like a torch held just above the rooftop.

“Do ye think we’ll live long enough to see home again,” Jamie whispered. He needed just a little encouragement to help him turn away.

“Perhaps not,” his brother said, denying him that reassurance. “It’s a wide, wide world with much to offer a willing soldier.” Ian turned and stepped onto the road.

“But at least ye’ll be laird of the manor one day. Surely ye mean to come back if we survive the war.”

“Nay, Jamie. I’ll not return to Kinkelding.” He slapped Jamie on the shoulder again. “It’s all yers. All of it.”

He remembered the harsh words his brother had exchanged with their father. “But da didn’t mean what he said—”

Ian's brow lowered like a dark storm. "He meant it, Jamie. And I'll not return just to see if he'll take it back again." He glared toward the house. "I hope it haunts him until the day he dies, and beyond."

His attention caught on something and his eyes narrowed, but then he turned and stomped away just as purposefully as before.

Jamie turned to see if perhaps their mother had come out to bid them farewell after all. But the figure in white, standing on the tower, was not Mother.

Elsbeth stood forward on the battlements with one arm held out to him. Or rather, to his brother. But Ian was already beyond the trees. He had no parting gesture for her, even though Jamie was sure his brother had seen her.

For the sparest moment, he entertained the possibility of returning to the house, of allowing his brother to go and fight without him. He wondered if it would even be possible to get the lass to see him clearly, to realize that one of the Houston lads truly loved her, just not the one she had supposed.

But he couldn't do that. He'd given his word to his father. He would join Lord Lovat in his father's stead. And he vowed, privately, that he would never let his father down as Ian had done.

Archibald Houston's familiar words echoed in his ears. "*Why else would God have made us all different, even from our brothers?*"

No. He couldn't go back. He couldn't make things right for Elspeth, but he could give her something. And give himself a bit of comfort in the meantime.

He could pretend, for another moment, that Elspeth really saw *him*, that she was reaching out to *him*, and not to Ian. It was something he was forced to do, at times, to convince himself that he was a man like any other—not just a second son, a second choice.

He put his hand to his mouth, then raised it and blew the kiss her way. From the distance, he couldn't be sure, but thought she pretended to catch it. Then once again, she extended her hand. He reached toward her, in turn, as if they might touch fingers if they simply stretched far enough. Then, after a nod, he turned away.

He never told Ian about that kiss. He kept that experience to himself through marches and long nights, standing guard and drilling with other Highlanders. He doubted Ian would have been moved by it in any case. His brother had seen the vision in white for himself and not bothered to acknowledge it. So if Jamie mentioned the gesture he and the lass had exchanged, Ian might have mocked him for being soft.

But deep within, there was a small part of Jamie that feared his feelings for Elspeth made him an imperfect brother. Perhaps he hadn't dishonored his father, but had he dishonored his own blood just the same?

Sitting on the knoll, he glanced up at the tower. In the strange light of the gloaming, he could almost imagine her there...

But he *wasn't* imagining! Elspeth was standing there once again! Had she been there the night before and he'd wasted an entire day because he'd not believed she was real? An ironic turn, for a ghost not to believe.

Jamie dared not climb to his feet, trying not to draw attention, hoping the others couldn't see her as he could.

Still in her white nightdress, Elspeth reached toward the road. The pale cloth had an unearthly glow about it and Jamie knew without a doubt that the lassie's spirit lingered there, roused by the same memory he'd just been recalling in his own mind.

He turned to look at the road, almost expecting to see an eager version of himself and Ian turning back at the drive for one last glimpse.

But there was no one.

He looked again to Elspeth and watched as she caught another kiss, the same as she'd done that night long ago. Only, how sad it was that there was no one blowing it to her.

And as he continued to watch, the lass's form began to fade.

Fading to sleep. Just as he had hundreds of times. But where would she go? Had she truly taken her own life?

The answer was clear enough a moment later when her form appeared on the ground below the tower—where she would have landed if she'd jumped from the parapet.

Poor lassie.

The light faded into the pavement there and was gone.

Jamie was caught off guard by the swell of anger he suddenly felt toward his brother. What was wrong with him? After all, he'd worried about Ian for far too long to harbor a grudge against him now. Besides, he couldn't have known what Elspeth would do.

Perhaps, if Jamie had been a little braver himself, a little less keen to impress his father and a little more keen on helping the lass, he would have turned back that morning. He might have found a way to make Elspeth happy. He might have helped her see that she was well and truly loved. Her life might not have ended as it had.

Ashamed, he said a little prayer that his heroic deed would involve something other than rousing Elspeth from her light slumber. But even as he made the wish, he knew it was in vain. He could not collect his boon if he left the lass to suffer the same fate from which Soni had saved him. He simply had to help her. It would prove best for them both.

The problem would be enticing the lass to move on. What revenge could he entice her with? What injustice would he have the power to right? He was no witch. And Soni was far too busy to come to his aid.

Besides, heroes needed no aid. Else they would not be heroes.

Chapter 8

Jamie looked toward the fountain and found Dawson watching him with interest.

"What do you think, Jamie?" he shouted. "Feel like doing a little ghost hunting?" Obviously, the fellow had been blind to Elspeth's figure on the tower, even though he had a clear view of the parapet from where he stood.

Jamie took a deep breath and let it out slowly, savoring the fact that he could breathe in the familiar flavors of Kinkelding, at least for the time being. The only smell missing was that of baking bread—a smell that swirled around his head in the mornings and faded but never completely vanished at night.

“Sure,” he answered, even though he was positive he did not wish to rouse Elspeth’s spirit so soon after she’d returned to her rest.



They began in the front of the house. Dawson ran his hands over the stones and spoke of the manor as a living thing while speaking to the camera.

“One of the most haunted places in Scotland,” he said. It was all rubbish of course. The entire country of Scotland was filled with ghosts who refused to give up the fight for love, or revenge, or pride of country.

Culloden was another matter. There were easily more ghosties there, per inch, than anywhere other than the prisons. If those yanks would have gone hunting on the infamous moor instead, Jamie would have been free to speak with Elspeth’s spirit without a bloody audience.

“We’re going into the heart of the house now,” Dawson explained to the large camera lens being carried by another man who dogged his footsteps. The lens was held waist high and angled up at Dawson’s face. The light gave him the same eerie look Jamie had seen on the fountain’s figures outside.

It made him uncomfortable for an entirely different reason—he wondered if he could trust the camera operators not to drop those lenses so low the viewing audience would be looking up Jamie’s authentic kilt!

They escorted the cameras through the sitting room, the entrance hall, and into the kitchens.

Dawson’s eyes widened and his voice dropped. “This afternoon, when we first entered the kitchen area, we heard a woman scream. Of course we weren’t expecting any contact during the day, so we didn’t get it recorded. So... technically,” Dawson paused and tipped his head back and forth as if weighing his words. “I shouldn’t even tell you about it, but I guess it’s too late now, right?” He laughed lightly, then sobered. “I will admit I’m pretty freaked out right now. I mean, if this tortured woman comes back and screams again, like she did earlier, I’ll probably wet myself, you know?”

Hardly professional scientists, Jamie’s new friends. But perhaps their ghost hunting show was aimed for a younger crowd more interested in being frightened than discovering the truth behind a haunting. As for Jamie, he was fairly certain he knew why Kinkeld House was haunted by a woman in white. But was it his place to share her reasons with the rest of the world?

He thought better of it.

“This is Jamie Houston,” Dawson announced, and the camera followed his gesture.

Bright lights shone in his face, but after a few seconds of vigorous blinking, Jamie was able to see clearly in spite of them.

Dawson showed no regrets for surprising him as he had. “Jamie saw something just before we heard the scream, didn’t you Jamie? You called out a name, then

ran a few steps and stopped. I never got the chance to ask you what happened, man. Can you tell us now?"

Jamie showed Dawson, with his look of disgust, just what he thought of being caught off guard while the camera was pointed in his face. But once again, he found it difficult not to tell the truth. He was free to walk away, he supposed, but he might lose his chance to roam the grounds—something he couldn't risk with time ticking away as it was.

He would simply have to watch his tongue and not tell secrets that were not his to tell.

"I saw a woman in white," he said, "standing about there." He pointed to where Elspeth had stopped and screamed before melting away like so much froth.

"And you called out a name. You're from around here, Jamie. Did you recognize her or something?"

Did he tell the truth?

Perhaps a heavy helping of honesty might satisfy Dawson and Jamie would be able to go about his business. Perhaps the man simply needed a good fright to clear him out of the way so he could do his noble deed for Elspeth before his time was done.

Prince Charles Edward Stuart might very well be waiting for him at that moment.

It was all the excuse he needed to get on with ridding the place of the yanks before he went about ridding it of its ghosts.

"Aye. I recognized the lass," he said casually.

Dawson hid his smile. "And what is her name?"

Jamie bit his lip and said nothing while he plotted his strategy.

"Aw, come on, man. It won't hurt to say her name. Sweet something? Wasn't that what you said?"

He could just imagine the eejit walking around the house bellowing Sweet Something over and over again. But if he called the right ghost, maybe he'd get more than he bargained for.

"Her name is Elspeth."

Dawson frowned. "Elspeth? Really?" He gave a light shrug. "And you grew up around here, so you know this ghost, right? That's how you know her name?" In the background, Tuke grinned and raised his thumb, first at Dawson, then at Jamie.

"Nay. I didna ken the ghost, I kened the woman."

"But she's been haunting this place since the mid 1700's." Dawson straightened, unhappy to think Jamie was meddling with him.

"That's right," he said with a smile. "I'm nay sure when the lass died. But I do know the last time I saw her was in the spring of 1745."

"Cut!" Dawson waved a hand for the cameras to stop. He forced a smile. After all, Jamie was working for free. "Maybe we'd better get our lines straight after all, Jamie. I mean, our viewers can do math, you know?"

"Oh, aye." He tried to keep his own smile under control.

"And we're not going to try to convince them that you're what, nearly three hundred years old?"

Jamie shook his head. "Nay. Two hundred and eighty-eight by my reckoning. I was just eighteen—"

"I hate to break it to you," Tuke said, coming forward. "But you still *look* eighteen—"

"When I was killed at Culloden Moor." He raised a brow at the dreadlocked man and waited for him to perform his calculations.

It sounded as if everyone in the house had ceased breathing except for Tuke. The man exhaled forcefully, and repeatedly, through his nose. His stick-like hair whipped back and forth each time he turned to pace in the opposite direction, which was often considering the small space at the back of the kitchen.

"We should have hired an actor," he muttered. "Rented a kilt. Written a script."

"But we don't have time," Dawson complained.

"I know." Tuke closed his eyes and let his head fall back even though he continued to pace. "Just let me think a minute."

Matt on the other hand, stood stock still with his jaw hanging wide. The device in his hand was about to slide through his fingertips.

Jamie pointed. "Ye may wish to catch that."

The fellow looked at his hand, seemed to remember what he was supposed to be doing, then lifted the little silver box and pointed it at Jamie.

"That's better," he said and gave the poor kid a grin.

Matt recovered his jaw and returned a rather dazed smile. "So you're the ghost you were talking about, right? When you said the ghost is here because I'm here."

Jamie toyed with the idea of lying to him, just because he seemed so nervous. But perhaps the chain-rattling should begin with the weakest member.

"Oh, aye. I'm a ghost. But there are two others here, if ye'll remember. When Elspeth wakes again, I wouldn't want to be ye, of course..."

"Me? Why?" He looked over each shoulder, then stepped closer to Jamie—until he remember that Jamie was a ghost too, which made him jump back again. The look in his eye nearly earned him sympathy. But Jamie wouldn't worry about that. He had an appointment to keep, after all. And he wasn't interested in waiting another two hundred and seventy years to reschedule.

Suddenly, the line from a horror movie came to mind. It took effort indeed to keep his expression sober while he delivered it.

"Because, laddie... *she knows what scares ye.*" Jamie's breath caught when the lovely figure of Elspeth began to materialize next to his nervous friend.

"That's not funny," Matt said firmly, though his raised hand clearly shook. He jumped to the side and stared at the lass who, that time at least, was visible to all.

Tuke stopped muttering.

"Hello, Elspeth," Jamie said, then gave her a formal bow like he would have done long ago.

"James Houston," she said, and gave him a brief curtsy. "Dinna leave me in suspense, laddie. Where's yer brother?" She glanced at the doorway three times before her smile fell away.

Suddenly, he was eighteen again and felt more invisible than all those years roaming the moor.

Chapter 9

The lass wished to ken where his brother was. She had barely a greeting for him, and all the worry in the world for Ian.

He couldn't help but be bitter about it. After all, he'd thought about her nearly every day for what must surely have been a hundred thousand days. And Ian had given her less than a minute's consideration the day he left home. If his brother had thought kindly about Elspeth more than a hundred times the remainder of his life, Jamie would have been surprised.

But to say as much would be cruel, and he was not cruel.

"I am sorry, Elspeth," he said. "He's not with me this night."

He dared not speak of ghosts, or the actual year, for he didn't know if the lass was aware she'd died. Some on the battlefield were unable to comprehend what had truly happened to them and wandered about looking for a purpose. There was one sad fellow who couldn't seem to get past the fact that the Jacobites had truly been defeated. And the word, defeated, was all he could ever bring himself to say, to mortals and ghosts alike.

Jamie knew of a few blokes working at Culloden's Great Visitor's Center who had the same difficulty believing the recent referendum had failed.

"Not with ye," Elspeth repeated and glanced at the doorway again, still expecting Ian despite Jamie's answer. "And why not? Where is he? I've been waiting so long."

Jamie nodded. "I ken ye have, lassie. And I ken just how long it's been. But as for me, it is good to see yer charming self again, I must say."

Her head turned sharply to face him. "Aye. And thank ye." She finally took notice of the mortal quivering next to them both. "And who are ye, laddie? What do ye want from a weary ghostie like meself?"

Ah, so she was aware, then. Jamie was relieved to hear it, for it would naturally be a simpler thing to get the lass to move on to... what came after... if she already knew her worldly life was done.

Matt gaped silently at Elspeth. A great brown trout, begging for water.

Jamie elbowed the lad. "Dinna fash, Matt. She willna harm ye." He gave the lass a sly smile.

"Nay. I willna harm ye," she said, "*if* ye run fast and far enough, aye?" She leaned close and regarded the poor laddie up and down, her nose coming close enough to touch his, though he obviously couldn't feel it.

Jamie bit his lips to keep from laughing.

"R... run?" Matt stammered.

"Aye," she whispered. "Fast. And far. Off ye go, then." She waved toward the arched doorway with the back of her hand.

Matt nodded and bent down, laying his recording device on the ground, keeping his wide eyes upon her all the while. Then he shuffled quickly to the doorway, shoved one of the slack-jawed camera men out of his way, and ran. Jamie looked into Elspeth's eyes while they listened to the young man's footsteps sputtering out of the house. They heard the front door open, but it never closed.

Elspeth waved her hand toward the arch and the neglected door banged shut with a hearty boom.

“A neat trick, that,” Jamie said. “I never learned to move much. Of course, on the moor, there isn’t much that needs moving.”

She instantly sobered. “Ye died at Culloden then. Like they said?”

It warmed his heart to hear the concern in her voice. It gave him hope that she might remember the days when she had eyes only for him.

“Aye,” he said. “I’d have hurried home otherwise.” He gave her a look he hoped would clarify—that he would have hurried home to her if not for the small detail of his death.

She bit her lip, reached out and took his hand. He felt like she could actually see him for a change. Her sweet and tender face leaned close and her clear green eyes peered into his. “I’m sorry, Jamie. I am.”

If she’d have been a living, breathing woman at that moment, he would have taken her into his arms and kissed her whether or not she’d once belonged to his brother.

A furious whisper caught his attention. Tuke was urging Dawson forward, insisting he interrupt. And the moment was ruined before the man ever took a step.

“Uh, Jamie?” Dawson’s voice shook. “Could you, you know, introduce me to your friend?” He waved for a camera man to come forward, but none of them were willing.

Elspeth blinked rapidly and Jamie could tell whatever connection they’d had was broken.

She turned to look at Dawson. “Fast and far,” she whispered. Her form began to fade. Her eyes lost their focus.

“Wait,” Jamie shouted. “Elspeth, I’ve come to help ye!”

She blinked again, saw him again. Her nightdress grew more solid. “Jamie? Help me? Ye’re going to bring Ian to me?” Hope and confusion warred across her brow. “Ye can do that?”

He shook his head. “Nay. I cannot bring my brother back. But I can help ye... to let go. Ye must allow yerself to move on to what comes next, lass.”

It turned his stomach to hear such words march across his own tongue. Just the night before, on Culloden’s dark moors, the wee witch had said the same to all of Culloden’s 79. They’d been sorely disappointed in her, to spout the same gibberish that ghost chasers always spouted. But then Soncerae had proven herself different from the rest. She’d promised them the revenge for which they’d been waiting, if they’d only do her bidding.

He saw that same disappointment on Elspeth’s fading face. She’d heard such nonsense before.

“What if it isn’t nonsense,” he said, guessing her thoughts, desperate to hold her attention until he’d had a chance to convince her. “What if there truly is something better waiting for ye... on the other side?”

Elspeth sighed. Her imagined breath came out in a white cloud as if the air was cold enough to shatter into tiny ice crystals.

“Nay, Jamie. I’m content to wait for Ian. He’ll come back to me. He promised.”

“Oh?” He put his hands on his hips, hoping his defiance would keep her with him. “Did he now?” Jamie couldn’t believe the claim. Surely, she was lying to him, but she looked right convinced her words were true. “And what did he say, lass? When did he tell ye he’d come back for ye?”

As soon as the question left his lips, he wished it back. Of course his brother was capable of telling Elspeth anything she wished to hear. He’d lied to many a lass in order to win their... affection, and tried to instruct Jamie on just how to do it. But he’d never envied his brother that reputation of taking advantage of any pretty young woman he came upon. And though he never would have embarrassed his older brother by calling him dishonorable to his face, he’d wished he could have been brave enough to do it.

If he had, would Ian have changed?

Was it Jamie’s fault his brother went on toying with the lassies, because he was unchecked?

His father couldn’t have seen it for obvious reasons. Their mother wouldn’t have known much about it. But Jamie saw. And Jamie knew. And he’d done nothing.

The fault for Elspeth’s heartbreak might well have been laid at Jamie’s feet after all.

He pulled a hearty breath into his lungs and prepared himself to deal with that possibility.

Tears shimmered in Elspeth’s eyes and dripped down her cheeks, but they disappeared long before they ever reached the ground.

“When did he tell me? Why, the morning he left. He promised me...”

That couldn’t be true. He and Ian had slept in the same room the night before. They’d stayed awake longer than they should, unable to sleep for the fear and excitement stirring in their veins. Ian had left the room only a few moments before Jamie, and he’d been deep in conversation with their father when Jamie found him again. There’d been no time for Ian to make promises to Elspeth that morning.

His doubt must have been plain his face, for the lass gasped.

“Ye dinna believe me!” She narrowed her eyes. “I’ll have ye know he promised me with a kiss that morning. I was standing atop of the west tower, watching the pair of ye go...”

Jamie’s gut tightened in anticipation of a blow he saw coming.

“Ye both turned at the road and looked back. Only... After ye went on yer way, yer brother lingered. He blew me a kiss that said as plain as day that he would be back for me. He reached out...” Her arm lifted and her gaze focused on something far more distant than the kitchen wall. “He reached out, like he longed to touch me one last time...” Her arm dropped along with her voice. “And then he was gone.”

She closed her eyes as if the tenderness of her memory was simply too much to bear. When she opened them again, she leaned toward Jamie and put her own hands on her hips. “The least I can do for the man is wait for him, Jamie Houston. He’ll be sore if I give up on him, aye?”

She glanced at Dawson and the others like they were little more than unwanted furnishings.

“This is yer home, remember. It is only my opinion, but I doona believe ye should allow beasts in the house.”

It was all the encouragement the yanks needed to scramble their way to the front door, which, by the way, closed quietly.

Elspeth gave a good riddance nod in their wake, stretched her neck from side to side, and closed her eyes again. Her face was suddenly drawn and creased with tired lines, like she'd lost many a night's sleep waiting for that silent promise to be kept.

And as she faded, Jamie decided it might be best not to tell her... *it already had been.*

Chapter 10

Elspeth felt her mind stirring, but tried to ignore it. Waking meant pain, each and every time.

It wasn't the flagstones beneath her that made her ache, of course. She was long past feeling anything so physical. There would be no ache in her bones, her head, or her belly.

No. It was only her heart, ethereal as it may be.

For two hundred and seventy years, she'd ached. And if she was very careful and allowed her mind to still, she could postpone the return of her woes for a day, maybe more.

It was a fact she was usually unaware how much actual time passed between wakings. She only knew the year because of things she overheard. Occasionally, a newspaper was discarded where she might glimpse the date. But for the most part, she was left to guess the season by the weather. And in a country like Scotland, it was impossible to tell.

She could wake one evening to the soft patter of rain. The next, she would find lazy snowflakes floating to the ground. But had those two days been one after the other? Or had they been different seasons? Month's apart, or years?

She closed her eyes tighter against the stones. If she could simply slip into nothingness for a few days, Jamie Houston would be gone and her shadow life would resume. Painful, but not insufferable.

For it was, in truth, agonizing to see the man's face.

She groaned inwardly. The thought of Jamie Houston was enough to keep her from her respite. His image made her fear she might never find that temporary rest again.

With a sigh, she sat up. Absently, she willed away the ghost of blood on her nightclothes, as she always had upon rousing. But her next worry was not so habitual—she wondered what her hair looked like.

Heaven and angels help her, she wanted to look presentable in case she saw Jamie again! What nonsense! Why would it matter? It wasn't as if Ian was coming for her anytime soon.

Jamie had been foolish to claim it would never happen, but she knew better. She'd seen the gesture from afar. She'd read the heartfelt pledge as surely as if he'd written it in his own blood. No mistake.

And then...after her untimely death, the years mattered not at all. Ian would still come for her. Even if he was nothing more than spirit when he did so, he would come. He would remember that promise, no matter if a wife and children had occupied the rest of his mortal time, no matter if his bones were buried in a distant country. He would remember, and he would come.

And she was determined to be there, on her tower, when he arrived.

He would see for himself that she'd kept her unspoken promise as well. In his eyes, it would appear as if she hadn't moved an inch since last he'd seen her. He would hurry to her side, and they would touch their hands together, just as she'd imagined thousands of times.

No. Ian wouldn't forget. And if he had forgotten, he would remember. Any day now...

With peace restored in her breast, she allowed herself to slip away once more.



There is one thing that plagues both mortals and ghosts. Physical bodies notwithstanding, dreams also come to spirits.

Unfortunately, Elspeth slipped not into a senseless state, but into a restless dream. Dread filled her, knowing just what would come, for pleasant dreams were lost to her.

She dreamed she was on her tower again. Always on her tower. Always in her nightdress. Always with her hair spilled around her shoulders just as Ian preferred to see it.

And there she stood, pressed against the fanciful crenellation, intent on painting a picture when he turned to look back. An image he could carry in his mind of the woman who waited for his return from war. A reason to give her young soldier to fight wisely and come home.

Her heart leapt when his figure moved away from Kinkeld House and into view. Each of his steps pricked at her heart as he moved ever farther from her down the drive. But she would not so much as whimper. She'd promised, when they'd parted for the last time, the night before. She wouldn't fall upon his neck and embarrass him. She'd be as stoic as his mother. Proud and silent as he went off to do what a man had to do.

"I'll stand on the tower and watch ye go," she'd told him. "All I need, to see me through until ye come back to me, is for ye to turn back. Just the once. Turn back and know that I will be here a'waitin'."

He'd promised.

But as he stomped down the drive with purpose, she worried he might forget. It was torture, truly.

So she'd prayed. "*Turn, Ian. Turn. If ye love me, ye'll turn.*"

And still he stomped.

Perhaps he's frightened. Perhaps his parents look on and he's trying to prove he's not afraid... But he willna forget me.

Jamie appeared on the drive then. He hurried to catch up with Ian. The end of Archibald's Brown Bess wobbled against his broad back as he ran. Two grown men, strapping and brave, going off to fight for prince and country.

Once the two were together, the confusion began. They were too far away to distinguish their faces. And to make things worse, they began dancing around each other, shoving shoulders, teasing as they always did.

She held her breath as their forms neared the road. Another moment or two, and they'd disappear behind the thicket of trees twenty feet to the left.

Turn, Ian! Turn! If ye love me...

And he turned. The very angels in Heaven sang in her ears! He hadn't forgotten.

Jamie, at his shoulder, turned as well. They both looked their fill, then Jamie turned back to the road and went on.

But Ian lingered. She knew, without seeing him clearly, that his attention was on her and not the house.

She raised her arm and reached out to him, telling him she knew.

Ian. My love! Come back to me!

Then he won her eternal devotion by placing a kiss on his fingers and blowing it back to her.

Giddy with joy and relief, she pretended to catch it. Then, for the longest moment, they simply stared at each other. His hand rose to match hers, like he longed for one last touch, just as she did.

Far too soon, he nodded and turned away. He stepped into the road. The Brown Bess nearly swung off his shoulder as he did so, but he shrugged it back into place. Half a dozen steps took him beyond the trees that blocked her view of him. And while he took those steps, she was frozen in horror.

Surely, Ian had also been carrying a gun.

Surely he wouldn't be hurrying off to join Lord Lovat unarmed! And Jamie was a second son. Archibald's gun should have gone to Ian—unless Ian had his own.

Surely!

But she kept replaying in her mind the moment that Jamie had stepped into view and hurried to catch up with his brother. That weapon slapping his back as he went.

That was it. She only remembered Jamie's gun because it had bobbed back and forth so comically as he ran. Ian's weapon had done nothing to draw her attention. That was all.

That was all.

And yet, that concern had plagued her dreams all these years.

She took solace, though, in the logic that only one of the brothers had noticed her on the tower, had blown her a kiss, had lingered and reached out to her. Hadn't she told Ian she would be there? Jamie wouldn't have known to look for her, and he certainly wouldn't have blown her a kiss...

Her own weary conscience nudged her, reminding her that Jamie Houston was probably still on the property, available for the asking. All she needed to do, in order to end those nightmares, was to put the question to him.

Was it ye?

She was a fool not to ask it, but it wasn't foolishness that tied her tongue... it was cowardice.

Chapter 11

Wasn't that a fine kettle of fish then?

Jamie had frightened off the film crew, but he'd also lost Elspeth. Soni might show herself at any moment, take a good look about, and shake her head in pity before sending him off to face his Maker.

It was probably time he considered what he might say to The Almighty that had him high-stepping back out into the yard to look for the lads to whom he'd been unkind. If his actions would have disappointed Archibald Houston, they surely would disappoint God. But it was probably his respect for the former that dictated his actions for the moment.

Though most of the equipment was still inside the manor, the men were all out at the vans. The lights inside the vehicles gave them away.

Jamie hiked out to them and rapped on a side door. After a long moment, it slid open, though tentatively.

"How is Matt?" he asked.

Dawson shook his head. "We don't know where he went."

"I came to beg yer forgiveness."

To a man, their brows rose in surprise.

"I'm sorry if I frightened ye," he said. "I was wanting a private word with the lass, ye see..."

"No problem," Dawson said. "But just to be clear, you're really a ghost?"

"Aye."

He gave them a brief summary of his life, his death, and his time at Culloden. It was disappointing that so much could be covered in a few sentences.

It was clear that the crowd was a little mixed. Some believed he was a ghost and some did not. But they all conceded that he had, indeed, been speaking with the 18th century ghost of a woman, and on familiar terms.

"What's the problem, lads?" Jamie chuckled. "Is it because ye watched me eat supper with ye?"

That started an entirely new conversation that ended with him explaining about the quest to perform a noble deed.

A camera man raised his hand to get attention. "So, that's why you wanted us out of here, so we didn't steal your thunder?"

"Steal my thunder?"

The man shrugged. "Well, if we helped her cross over to the next life, or whatever, then you wouldn't fulfil your quest, right?"

"Ye wish to help the woman?"

Dawson grunted. "Well, yeah. That's what we do. It's not all for the camera, you know. If she never shows up on film, we'll still try to convince her to move on." He shrugged a shoulder, which wasn't easy in the tight space, with seven other men crouched inside one van.

Jamie was taken aback. He'd heard many a "medium" claim to want to help the spirits they harassed, but most of them were more interested in their own ends. So it was surprising to hear it, even though he'd come to like Dawson and his crew. It

must have been the dramatic acting in front of the camera that had convinced him otherwise.

But something else occurred to him and he was sorely ashamed.

There he was, sure as rain in Scotland that his motives were nobler than those of the yanks. But in fact, his intention of aiding Elspeth had been driven primarily by his own thirst for revenge. He was no better than Dawson and the rest. In fact, he was worse. At least Dawson had intended to help the woman whether or not he got footage of her.

Could he claim the same?

He pitied her, certainly. But did he hold just a little something back? Did he begrudge her enough, for choosing his brother over him, that he might have left the lass to her haunting if it did not suit his end?

It fairly frightened him to think it. And if it was true...

He was not his father's son!

Chapter 12

Sincerely ashamed of his behavior, Jamie led the yanks back to Kinkeld House. He even helped carry one of the larger cameras for a man who looked a bit too nervous to be trusted with it. In an attempt to lighten the mood a bit, he mustered up a conversation with Dawson.

"I'm grateful ye lads have had experience with this sort of thing. From a ghost's perspective, I've never paid much attention to ghost whisperers per se. I wouldn't have kenned how to go about sending a ghost to the other side."

"Experience?" Dawson grimaced as he walked. "We don't really have experience. We're always just... kind of... shooting from the hip."

"Shooting from the... I don't understand," Jamie said, but he suspected the explanation wasn't going to resemble what he wanted to hear.

"I mean," Dawson spoke to the road before him and gestured oddly with his hands. "We've never actually seen a ghost before, you know? Elspeth is our first real sighting."

Jamie concentrated on his steps, determined not to stop and take issue with the man. There would be nothing gained by upsetting them all again, and a fine tongue lashing from a ghost would likely send them all running back to the vans.

Forgive me, Elspeth. The doctors I bring ye are no doctors at all.



As it turned out, Elspeth's form had never showed up on the recordings, but they kept filming anyway. Tuke claimed he'd be able to make something out of the clips they did have, which had recorded her voice. However, he didn't sound any more convincing than Dawson had when trying to explain just how they would be shooting from the hip.

It didn't much matter to Jamie whether or not the lads were able to make a tv program out of the experience, but since they were kind enough to worry over

Elspeth's soul, he would do what he could to make sure their trip to Scotland hadn't been in vain.

He patiently waited for a camera to be pointed his way before he spoke, and then spoke clearly.

"We'll find Elspeth by the tower. It seems the lass fell to her death there, so when she fades... That is, when she goes *dormant*, as it were, she'll likely return to the place and position in which she died, aye?"

Tuke hurried forward, whispered something to Dawson, who nodded, then turned to walk backward so he could face both the camera and Jamie.

"Tell me," he said. "Is it the same with all ghosts? They return, not just to the place they died, but the position?"

"Aye. At least it is true of all the ghosts I know."

Dawson's brows rose and his steps grew slightly more skippish. "Really? Well, uh, um, would you mind telling us just how many ghosts you know? Personally?"

Jamie turned his head away from the camera while he considered. If he told the truth, which he preferred to do, there might be a great run on Culloden Moor by ghost hunters who had no inkling of how many spirits truly wander there.

However, if Soni had been sending the others away, one every few minutes or so, she might have cleared all his fellows off the moor already. Besides, he'd heard one of the camera operators explain that it would be a few months before they would need to have the footage from Kinkeld House ready to air.

Plenty of time for Soni to finish her business with the rest.

"Sorry, dude." Dawson laughed. "Would you rather not tell us how many ghosts you know? Or are you counting?"

Jamie turned back until the light shone on his cheek. "Those I know well, including Elspeth?"

"Yeah. Including Elspeth."

He nodded once. "Seventy-nine."

One of the men at their backs used an expletive Jamie had never heard before. The camera and the light attached to it, veered off to the left. A hand stopped him and Jamie looked down into the face of the shortest man amongst them.

"Those, uh, seventy-nine, um..." He took a deep breath. "They're not here *now*, are they?"

Tuke rolled his eyes and took the man's camera, handed it to another, then returned to put his arm around the short man.

"Nay. They're not here," Jamie said. "The rest are at Culloden Moor, remember?"

Tuke led the guy away from the rest and tried to calm him down. Dawson stood next to the fountain staring up at the tower. Jamie joined him and pointed to the ground where he'd seen Elspeth's spirit fade.

"I saw her there," he said.

"But she's not there now?"

He shrugged both shoulders, as a gesture as much as a need to flex the muscles there. "She may be. Once she's dormant, ye can't see her. Or rather, I can't see her, so I assume ye can't either."

Dawson nodded and looked back to the tower. "High enough to kill you if you fell."

Jamie sighed with the weight of the truth, that she hadn't fallen, but jumped to her death.

Dawson's face twisted. "You think someone might have pushed her?"

"Nay." Jamie scoffed at the idea of anyone so villainous at Kinkelding.

With a sudden smile and a wrinkle around his eyes, Dawson nodded toward the tower. "Let's go up."

"Ye think ye might attract her attention up there, do ye?"

"It's worth a shot."

Chapter 13

They took the short camera man with them and left the others below for Tuke to direct. The outer door was locked, but Jamie knew another way in from the third floor, at the highest point where the tower and manor were still attached.

They went to a small solar with a wide fireplace. To the side of the mantle stood a small arched door that might have been a short cupboard of some sort. But it was actually part of an escape route meant for the family, a way to get themselves into the tower without needing to go outside to do it. A heavy slab of stone sat just inside the small passage, ready to be moved into place should the manor be attacked, the tower becoming a refuge that seemingly could not be breached once the outer door was sealed.

The escape plan had been a great comfort to Archibald Houston after he'd lost his sight in an accident at the smithy's. If the alarm bell was rung, the family could find safety without the need for him to gather them all himself.

There was no key for the door, but members of the family knew how to move the handle and slide one of the slats of wood to reveal a metal loop. A push of Jamie's finger, and the door popped open.

"I showed this to Elspeth," he said. "For nearly a week before the harvest, we would sneak into the tower, day or night, and play King of the Castle, like children."

His heart strained at the memory, searching for that euphoria he'd felt during that stretch of days when Elspeth only had eyes for him. He'd felt invincible. The world lay at their feet as if the west tower had truly been the seat of their kingdom.

It all started at the Cean Mor Stones, to the north...

The stones so ancient, they'd nearly worn flat to the ground. And covered with moss and lichens, they were nearly invisibly to passersby. One had to know they were there in order to find them.

Jamie spotted a rather pretty lass moving among them and crept closer for a better look, hiding among the shrubbery and trees that surrounded the place and made it into a veritable fairy clearing.

Elspeth was nearly eighteen, but she stood on the highest stone and pretended to be the queen of something, as a five-year-old might do. Talking to herself. Ordering her imaginary servants about while she stepped from stone to stone.

Plucking the petals from a flower, she tossed them on the wind and watched them blow away, one at a time.

"A soldier sent to war," she mumbled, "who deserves a kiss farewell." And she began kissing the petals before dropping them. After destroying a few flowers in that manner, she became sad. And Jamie grew sad too. Silly, he realized.

Determined to cheer them both, he hurried around behind her, picked up one of the pale purple petals and presented it to his fanciful queen, along with an elegant bow.

"A soldier returned, milady."

Her sudden smile pleased him, but the silence made him nervous.

"Ye see," he continued lightly. "Not all are lost."

She grinned and curtsied. "Thank ye, kind knight. And glad I am that ye've returned after so gallant a quest. I shall make thee a minor king, then."

She stooped and brought forth a long twig. After a fluid swipe that removed the dying leaves, she laid the end of it on his shoulder.

"Kneel, sir."

He knelt, but he stopped her stick with his hand when she would have moved it to his other shoulder.

"Pray, my queen, dinna send me away to be a minor king on some other shore. Allow me to stay here and serve ye better."

She raised a brow, but maintained her sobriety. "And how would ye serve me here, Sir Knight?"

He took the branch and tossed it aside, grasped her lovely hands in his, and stood. "I would be yer footstool, if ye willed it, Elspeth Murray. And I would give ye a pillow for yer lips."

"A pillow for my lips?" She shoved at him, but he wouldn't release her hands, so the push was half-hearted at best. "What pillow would I need for my lips?"

He laid a finger against his mouth and lowered his voice. "This pillow is yers, should ye need it, my beautiful Queen."

She licked her own lips and stared at his for the briefest moment before she dissolved into laughter. She pulled her hands free and collapsed into the center of the grass circled by the stones. The sun, peaking through the leaves, forced her to wince and close her eyes.

He sat next to her and reached, tentatively, for a cluster of leaves that had caught themselves in her dark tresses. Shaded by his shadow, she watched his eyes as he dragged the leaves away.

"Another noble deed, sir. Have ye no end to them, then?"

"Nay, milady. No end of noble deeds if those deeds be for ye, my queen."

He leaned forward and she didn't balk. Farther still, and she only watched him come. He lowered his head toward hers and she stopped breathing, but denied him nothing. Then he realized it wasn't because she expected a kiss, but that she didn't know what to expect.

An innocent, un-kissed lass.

He watched for the moment she realized what he was about. And he held his position, waiting to see if she would find some way to retreat, but she did not.

"Ye would rest yer lips on mine?" she asked.

"If ye will it."

She considered for so long, he expected her to deny him, but instead, she said, "Come, then."

Pillows upon pillows. Delight like he'd never known, just breathing in each breath as she released it was Heaven enough. He could have stayed for days, taking whatever she would allow him, be it her breath or her touch.

Elsbeth *was* his queen. He would deny her nothing. But he would also protect her from the likes of him.

An unknissed lass no more, he thought, as he pulled away from her. And the weight of what he'd done descended upon him. She was his, in some unspoken way. His to protect. His to love. His to cherish, like a jewel he wished to keep hidden in his pocket so that no one else would know its worth and wish to take it.

Looking back through two centuries, Jamie understood the apprehension he'd felt at that moment. It wasn't because he worried someone would happen by, notice Elspeth's beauty and lure her away from him. The alarm was for what *Ian* would do if he saw the lass, if he knew how new she was to kissing. How Ian might take the same advantage of Elspeth he'd taken of others, knowledgeable or not.

He'd known, even then, that Ian could not be trusted near her. But what could he do?

So he showed Elspeth how to sneak into the tower. And though she hadn't noticed, he'd greedily kept her there for days under the guise of play. Their secret place. No one knew. A refuge from the world—but truly, just a place to hide from his brother.

Though his very soul had craved them, he'd kept the kisses to one or two a day. She asked him about it once, but he'd told her they were precious only if they weren't given freely.

She'd thought him sweet.

He'd thought her divine.

Then came the harvest. He rarely found opportunities to escape to the tower, but when he did, she was there. Because they had such little time together, the kisses came a bit more freely. So freely, in fact, he thought his heart might burst.

When the harvest was done, they were suddenly thrown together in public, encouraged to dance at the gathering when so many people pressed onto Kinkelding that his own knoll was lost beneath the trappings of celebration.

But Ian was watching him a bit closer than was comfortable. Perhaps it was simply Jamie's imagination, but he dared not glance in Elspeth's direction for fear of leading Ian to her.

It was folly. After two hundred and seventy years, he knew the moment he'd doomed them. In his attempt to hide her charms from Ian, he pretended he'd never taken notice of her in the first place.

He would never erase that look in her eye the first time, when she'd stepped up and asked him to dance with her. He'd given her a slight shake of his head, then walked away, not daring to take the time to explain.

The next time his eye found her, she was dancing with Ian.

After that night, it was she who refused to notice him.

"Auch, forgive me, Elspeth," he whispered into the darkness. "I was such a child in '45..." He searched the familiar curves inside the tower and found the start of the steps. "This way."

The camera lights switched on and nearly blinded him, and his eyes were still struggling to adjust when he opened the hatch to the parapet and climbed out into the natural illumination of the moon.

Most of the light, however, came from the lass in white, leaning off the south side of the tower, reaching out to someone in the darkness beyond. Someone who wasn't there.

And it broke Jamie's heart.

Chapter 14

"I see ye've brought the beasts back into the house," she said without turning. She lowered her arm, but still watched toward the road at the end of the drive, as if expecting Ian to return at any moment.

"He won't be coming, Elspeth."

"Ye cannot know that, Jamie Houston."

He walked to the crenellated wall and found a firm place to sit upon and face her. Many of the square stones had crumbled and fallen. It was no wonder the owners had tried to keep the tower locked away from curious ghost hunters.

"Indeed, lass. I do ken it," he said softly. "The day we left, he was angry with our da. They'd fought, ye see—"

"Over me, no doubt."

No use in denying it. "Aye."

She turned away from the view and truly looked at him. "Did ye ken, then, that yer fither caught us kissing in the barn the day before? He thought... He assumed... Well, he supposed the worst had happened, but he'd been wrong."

Not many a lass had been able to resist Ian's charms. So it surprised him that Elspeth, as innocent as she had been, could keep her head and her virtue once Ian had taken a fancy to her.

"That explains what I heard," he confessed. "I also assumed there was a child. Forgive me."

She laughed long and hard at that. "A child," she said when she finally had the breath to speak again. "He'd been wooing me for a mere week, Jamie. A week."

He shrugged and looked at the tips of his boots, embarrassed to have assumed such a thing.

She turned and looked at the road again, sighed, and took a step toward the crumbling edge.

Jamie shot to his feet in pure reaction, reaching for her. And for a fraction of a moment, he felt the fabric of her nightdress and the body beneath it. "Have a care," he shouted.

She gasped and turned in his arms. She'd felt it too! "How is it I felt yer hands, Jamie?"

He shook his head. "I dinna ken, lass. I simply meant to stop ye from falling."

She laid her hands carefully on his arms, but they continued on through and she stepped back quickly. Whatever the spell, it had been broken.

"Tis gone now," she whispered.

"Aye." But he stood his ground, blocking the spot where she usually stood, hoping he could hold her attention better that way, but also hoping she'd step close to him again. The feel of her, beneath his hands, made him ache for more.

Why was there not a witch about when he needed one? For surely, Soni could have given Elspeth a bit of substance for a time. Perhaps they'd have been able to relive a kiss or two.

But the lass showed no sign of coming near again. She leaned back against the stones that were higher at the western point. No need to fear her falling. No reason to hurry to her and try to take her into his arms again.

But oh, how he longed to do it.

He was suddenly reminded that they were not alone on that tower. Dawson and the camera man were crouched against the north side, inches from the door in the floor that sat open and waiting, in case they were told to flee.

Their presence reminded Jamie that he wasn't there for his own gratification. He had a purpose. He was there to help her move on, either with his encouragement, or with Dawson's. His feelings for Elspeth had nothing to do with what needed to happen that night.

"Elspeth," he began.

"Jamie," said, mocking him.

There was no way to make the words sound kinder than they were, so he simply said them.

"Ian vowed he would never return."

She gasped. Her mouth hung open as if he'd just reached forward and surprised her with a slap. And it took her half a minute to recover.

He bit his lip and waited.

"Ye lie," she said, then looked at their audience. "He lies."

Jamie shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry, lass. When we were standing there, at the end of the drive, I asked him if he thought we would live to return. He said it didn't matter, that he wouldn't be coming back, that he wouldn't give our da the chance to take back his harsh words..."

Elspeth's head began shaking, slowly at first, then faster. "He was hurt, that's all. He might have been angry, but he would have remembered himself. Eventually, he would have remembered his promise to me." She looked toward the road again, only this time, her brow furrowed with worry. He could almost read her thoughts. *What if he tells the truth?*

"Elspeth." He opened his arms to her. "I am sorry. But ye must listen to me."

"No!" She took a step toward her usual spot, but realized it would take her closer to him, so she hesitated. "He promised."

"Nay, lass. He did not." He watched opposing emotions flicker across her face. Fear, denial, and possibly, understanding. "It wasn't Ian who blew ye that kiss so long ago, Elspeth Murray. It was I."

Her ire rose as she inhaled. Her eyes narrowed. And he could imagine her making her stand, like a menacing demon, poised to send him from this world with the swipe of a powerful wing.

"Ye lie, Jamie Houston! I never thought I'd see the day when ye'd sell yer honor with a falsehood, and just to please those yanks."

He allowed his arms to fall to his sides and stood vulnerable to whatever she would attack him with.

“I’ve never lied to ye, Elspeth. Never. I told ye once, long ago, that I cared deeply for ye, but then a few days later ye were hanging on me brother’s arm. ‘Twas my fault, I know that. I thought to keep our friendship a secret from Ian, and foolishly thought ignoring ye, at the gathering, would accomplish it. But I was wrong.

“Then, when I saw ye so happy with Ian, I thought it best to never mention my feelings again. And later...” He waved in the general direction of her middle. She pretended not to understand his meaning. “When Ian and I set out that morning, it was I who stood so long at the road. I who blew ye that kiss and held out my hand to ye—”

“Ye lie, Jamie Houston! Ye’ve found a way to peer into my nightmares, and now ye use them against me!”

“Nightmares?” His heart nearly rent to twain. There were some, among Culloden’s 79, who suffered nightmares beyond the usual torment that kept them tied to the moor. He’d heard the horror in their voices when they’d cried out. “If ye suffer them as others do, lassie, I would beg God to pass that burden to me, if I thought he would.”

She laughed. “My nightmares would mean nothing to ye. For in them, I live that morning over and over again. But it is not Ian looking back at me from the road. It is ye, just as ye say. The pair of ye look so much alike, that in my nightmare, I’ve confused ye!” A great sob racked through her. Then another.

He stepped forward, determined to take her into his arms again whether or not they would feel it. But she took advantage of his movement, hurried around him, stepped to the edge, and flung herself off the tower!

Jamie was so shaken by the sight, he began to quake. Then his heart burst like a tankard swung angrily into a stone wall.

He was the one who cared for the woman, and yet he was the source of her nightmares? And for all he knew, the idea that he loved her and not Ian might have been what drove her to fling herself off the tower?

Oh, Soni! Why oh, why did ye send me to Kinkelding?

Ignoring the pieces of his heart scattered across the battlements, he stalked to the hole and lowered himself into the bowels of the dark tower. And woe betide any camera man who tried to follow.

Chapter 15

Elspeth was far too upset to find her rest, so she settled at the top of Jamie’s knoll and laid back to look at the stars. Not many clouds. A rare, clear night. It was almost calming.

Almost.

Heaven and angels help her, was it true? She thought back to those long days when she and Jamie had lived in their private little world and fallen hopelessly in love. Or at least he’d claimed to have done.

Had he been truthful?

She sifted through her memories and tried to think of another time Jamie might have lied to her, but she could remember nothing suspect. Of course, he might have had a talent for half-truths, for all she knew.

She couldn't say the same about Ian. There had been many a time she explained away his little lies, telling herself he only said things to avoid hurting her feelings unnecessarily.

She could still feel Jamie's hands on her, pulling her away from the edge even though he knew she was beyond mortal harming. It was Jamie who ran to her side without thought. Jamie who had finally come back to Kinkelding. Jamie whose touch she was able to feel after all those years.

She shook with an imagined shiver. Were her dreams nightmares? Or was she simply remembering that morning, over and over again, plagued because the truth did not align with her wishes? Plagued with her own guilt...for wanting it to be Jamie reaching out to her...

It would have been so much simpler had Ian only come.

She finally had to accept the fact that over two hundred and fifty years had passed and the chance of Ian suddenly remembering about her was no chance at all. But then again, it had taken Jamie all that time to return to Kinkeld House. So perhaps time meant nothing where spirits were concerned.

She spun on her bottom so she was facing the road. Will Ian come through the new gate? Will he be the same as he'd been when he left? Or will he have aged? Had he lived to be an old man? Or had he never survived the journey to the colonies, as many people did not? A long voyage would have killed Jamie for certain, his stomach was weak for such motion. But she didn't know if Ian suffered the same weakness.

It was odd how much more she knew about Jamie, after spending just less than a week, on and off, in the tower. Then a few times during harvest. And after the same amount of time with Ian, she knew so little. She tried to remember the conversations they'd had, but Ian's comments were always given with a kiss in mind.

She smiled at the memory of his cajoling her out of a hundred embraces. Then she sobered when she remembered what Jamie had said, that kisses given freely had less meaning.

A hundred freely given. A dozen hard-won.

Then she remembered the moment when those hard-won kisses lost all their meaning—when she'd asked Jamie to dance, and he'd walked away.

It was no wonder Ian was able to scoop up her heart. After all, it had been lying on the ground, bleeding, there for the taking.

She'd been so hurt she'd never allowed Jamie a chance to explain. She'd ignored him as he'd done to her. If he'd tried to get her attention, to apologize, she wouldn't have known. She'd only had eyes for Ian. She'd pushed all memory of Jamie out of her heart to make more than enough room for his brother.

Heaven and angels attend her! Had she misremembered all of it?



Jamie stalked to the road and back again. And by the time he was finished, he'd cleared his head of Elspeth Murray. And he thanked God that he hadn't wasted more time worrying about her while he'd been a resident of Culloden Moor.

Oh, how his fellows would laugh at him if they knew what a fool he'd been. And how disappointed they'd be if they knew how easily he'd given up the chance to earn his revenge.

A simple heroic act. 'Twas all that was needed.

Well, by all that was Scotland, he was going to get it done. And since sending the lass on to the next life was the only act available to him at the moment, he'd send her there and good riddance. He just had to find a way to do it.

He toyed with the idea of summoning a priest. But it might take the rest of the night to explain things. And dawn could arrive long before the man ever got his eyes open, let alone his mind on the task at hand. Besides, if Jamie didn't play a part in saving Elspeth, he might not earn that meeting with Charlie.

He'd been thinking about that meeting as his boots crunched up and down the drive. And he was thinking that a simple conversation might not do. A satisfying strike to the prince's face sounded more and more appealing. And since his adrenaline showed no signs of dissipating, there was every chance that Bonnie Prince Charlie might not be so bonnie when he arose the next morning.

Wherever it was that he did so.

Jamie refused to look at the tower in case a certain daft ghost might be hurling herself off the top of it again.

Did she do it regularly?

No matter, he told himself. She would cease that foolishness soon enough.

An idea came to him and he bellowed to the stars before he had the chance to think better of it.

"Soncerae!" He took a deep breath and tried again. "Soncerae! I have need of ye, lassie!"

Nothing happened. The stars had no answer for him as they slowly slipped behind gathering clouds. The moon rushed to its rest beyond the west horizon. And the singing in his blood was fading to a memory.

He stomped around the fountain half a dozen times to try to hang on to his ire. When he finally strode to an iron bench beside the manor wall, however, it was gone. His body had nothing left to spend except tears, but he kept them where they belonged, behind his eyes.

Exacting a little revenge against a poorly advised monarch wouldn't give him nearly the satisfaction he would have enjoyed had a certain female ghost been more pleased to set eyes on him again.

He'd been dishonest with himself. He didn't wish the lass to move on only because he wanted to complete his task. He wanted to end her suffering. He wanted her to be happy. It was a pity she couldn't narrow her eyes a bit and pretend he was his brother, if only for a moment or two. And he could pretend—

He suddenly remembered her comment. "*The pair of ye look so much alike.*"

And they did. They always had. Enough so that they might be mistaken for one another... in a *painting*.

Chapter 16

He found Dawson and his crew back at the vans again. One van was dark but through the rear windows he could see three bodies lying end to end on the floor. Another man slept in the driver's seat, his head resting against the window.

The second van was empty. The third held Dawson, Tuke, and the short camera man from the tower. Matt, apparently, was still missing. While he watched a small screen over Dawson's shoulder, the short one's eyes were wide and steady, like they might have frozen in that position—most likely when Elspeth had flung herself from the tower.

Dawson was searching his mobile with his thumbs jumping about. Tuke did the same with his own mobile, but his eyes were half closed.

Jamie knocked on the window and smiled. The way the three jumped, he worried they might have pissed themselves.

"Sorry," he called quietly through the glass. "Dinna give up yet, laddies. We've still a ghost to catch in the graveyard, aye?"

Dawson looked skeptical. "Another friend of yours?"

Jamie grinned. "We'll find out, won't we?"

He didn't bother telling them who he hoped they would find at the east end of the gardens. It was even a bit *beyond* the gardens, truth be told. So far that Elspeth, on the west tower, would never see him.

"Please, God," he prayed. "Let it be Ian!"



Dawn was on its way. And if ghosts were harder to rouse in the light of day, Jamie didn't have much time left. Since his 48 hours would be up when nighttime fell again, he was certain this was his last chance. If it wasn't Ian haunting the graveyard, poor Elspeth might never see an end to her torment.

"Oh, great." Tuke held out his hand and caught the rain that was only starting. The stars and moon were gone, so the wee storm might last well into the morning.

"Dinna fash," Jamie told him. "Spirits rarely notice the weather."

Tuke nodded but still wrinkled his nose at the sky. Apparently, the man wasn't worried about the ghost in the first place.

The camera man relaxed a bit when Tuke suggested he film from the small gate that allowed them inside the graveyard. It had been a small bit of ground when Jamie had last seen it. Perhaps thirty by thirty feet square. Now it was easily twice that size.

Newer headstones with flat faces cut a line through the center of the plots. Everything to the south side of that line was new and polished. Every marker on the north was carved of rougher stuff and most were tilted a little off kilter.

Jamie pointed. We'll find our ghostie there.

Dawson slowed and his shoulders sagged, but Jamie clapped him on the back to get him moving again. "Ye couldn't have expected him to be sitting on a cross, waiting for us, aye?"

Ian. Ian. Where are ye, man?

He hadn't stopped to think about how he felt about his brother, whether he'd want to fall on his neck and weep, or if he'd try to push his fist through the man's face. But he decided to simply wait and see. Let his body decide.

The rain finally fell in Scottish fashion and he shivered, reveling in the sensation of cool air passing over his wet skin. He pitied the others who had only small hats instead of a Great Kilt to unfurl and drape over their heads as he had.

The falling drops hushed against the grass and tapped at the markers, but nothing roused.

To his right, Tuke bounced and rubbed his arms. Dawson yawned to Jamie's left. No doubt the pair was hoping nothing would happen, that their night could finally end. But Jamie didn't have the luxury.

Elspeth didn't have that luxury.

He tried his hand at positive thinking. Yes, the ghost would show. Yes, the spirit would belong to none other than Ian. The man would be taken to Elspeth so the lass could either rejoice in their reunion, or despair when his brother proved no more interested in Elspeth than he had the last time he'd clapped eyes on her, reaching out from her tower.

Either way, the lass would be able to give up waiting for the man.

And then what?

Then Soni would come. He would bid his brother and Elspeth Godspeed and be on his way to meet with the prince. And with his ire damped nearly as much as his plaid, he expected the bonny man's nose was safe. Of course, he'd still be able to give him an earful.

And then?

And then he'd move on to whatever God ordained. He was tired in any case. No doubt he wouldn't have been up to the task of keeping Elspeth's ghost happy for much longer.

He thought of his spirit as a battery that had nearly been drained. Surely, after so long...

Though it destroyed his heart to think it, he would simply have to leave Elspeth in Ian's hands. If that was what would make the lass happy, then he wished for it too.

At least, that's what he told himself. Sternly.

The sky began to lighten. His body was cooling quickly, whether from the rain or from mortal life slipping away again, he knew not. But in either case, he pushed himself forward and stomped toward the older stones.

"Ian! Are ye here? Will ye wake for me? Please, *Ian Archibald Houston*, if ye're here, wake for me."

"Oy," a man grumbled and stepped out of a tall monument. "What's the racket then? Who calls me?"

He was taller even than Jamie, but his plaid was the same Goldenrod yellow. In fact, there was much about the man that made Jamie feel as if his own spirit had risen to greet him. The stone blue eyes were as familiar as could be.

Ian?

But no.

Archibald Houston stood tall and proud. The stoop in his shoulders was gone from bending to tap his cane on the ground. His eyes had life again, and they looked straight into Jamie's face. Tears streamed down his leathered cheeks.

"Jamie, my son!" He took a step forward, then paused and looked toward the gate. "Did Ian come with ye?"

Disappointment flooded Jamie as surely as the rain. Forever the second son.

"Nay, fither," he said. "Ian is not with me."

He recalled Ian's words on the road. *I'll not return just to see if he'll take it back again... I hope it haunts him until the day he dies, and beyond.*

What a wicked thing to wish upon your own father! And once again, Jamie had stood by and said nothing.

"I was too harsh with yer brother," the ghost said. "I pushed him away. He never came back, so I was never given the chance to say how sorry I was for it."

What had started earlier as a simmer in Jamie's gut finally reached a boil and he had no intention of holding his tongue.

Ian didn't need an apology, fither. What he lacked was a beatin'. Neither did he deserve Elspeth, poor lass. Ye weren't the only one who was blind, sir. I was blind as well. I love her. I love her still. And I should have stood beside her and told Ian she was mine, that he would have to find his amusement elsewhere."

His father frowned and studied the ground, and Jamie wondered if the man understood what he was talking about. Did he remember, after all that time, that there was a lass involved?

Finally, the old head shook. "Nay, Jamie. Yer brother kenned ye were taken with the lass. I overheard him say it. I was blind to many things, but not to that. I realized too late that he'd won her away from ye.

"Ye couldn't have known it was a' purpose. I tried to spare ye from that, at least, but it is best ye ken it now. Ye'll remember, I warned ye to watch yer own back?" He swallowed hard, though he had no need to. "At Culloden? Tell me. Did he do anything... to dishonor—"

"Nay, fither." Jamie was quick to put the man's worry to bed. "The day was lost and quickly. There was no shame in surrendering." He gestured toward the house. "There was an old man—"

"Huey?"

"Aye. He told me Ian was transported. I was happy to hear he lived. After all this time on the moors, I had never known..."

"On the moors?"

"Aye, fither. I've been on the moors all this time." And Jamie suddenly realized why he'd been content there—he'd been Jamie Houston, Number 64, not Jamie, the younger brother of Ian. He wouldn't mind so much, going back...

His father's shoulders fell along with his expression. "I'd hoped ye'd come for me, to take me on to God's judgment." He turned and wandered away. "I canna seem to do it meself, ye see. I just keep waiting for Ian to come—"

Jamie's ire returned to a boil. "Well, he won't be coming, da. Ye may as well stop waitin'. We were still on Kinkelding land when he vowed he would never return. He hoped..."

He caught his tongue quickly. It would be cruel to tell the man his eldest son had likely cursed him to his current unrest. But to lie was against all he'd ever

believed. And it had taken all this for him to realize he'd been so devoted to the truth only because his brother had not.

If Ian had been a better man, would Jamie have been a lesser one?

The question helped him forgive his brother a bit. Yes, he might have been able to call Ian to accounts, might have been a voice of censure for him, but then what would have become of Jamie Houston?

His father stood waiting for the rest of his comment.

"Ian hoped," he said cheerfully, "that ye could forgive him." It was a lie, but the sour on his tongue was nothing when compared to the relief on his father's countenance.

Archie Houston's eyes overflowed with tears again, like they had the moment he'd recognized Jamie.

"Truly? He wished for my forgiveness? When all this while..." He stepped further away, keeping his back turned until he'd composed himself. "Thank ye, Jamie. It's good to hear it."

Jamie nodded, but he knew his father's relief wouldn't last long, especially if the man was able to leave the graveyard and move on to where he was likely to learn the truth in any case. But at least his father could go.

Imagined or not, a weight lifted from Jamie's chest and he froze in his boots. What if his noble act had been to say bedamned to his honor and tell his father a wee lie so he could find his peace?

Had he not come to save Elspeth after all?

As if in answer to his question, a bright glow appeared at the edge of the family graveyard. Jamie was unable to look directly at it, but his father didn't seem to have that problem. His now-youthful face was lit with hope and he stepped toward the growing light. But he paused and turned back to his son.

"Come with me, Jamie. Do. Ye've done a grand thing for yer fither, laddie. Let me do the same for ye."

Jamie shook his head without the need to consider. "Nay, da. Go on ahead. I'll be along shortly, aye?"

His father glanced past Jamie's shoulder and smiled, perhaps in farewell to a home he had haunted far too long. Then he nodded once and was engulfed in blinding light. By the time Jamie was able to uncover his eyes, the only things in the yard were grave markers, and the only light was a dim glow behind gray clouds. A pale yellow edge of sky lined the mists to the east, and though the storm hid it, morning had come to Kinkelding.

Elspeth!

Chapter 17

Jamie spun on his heel to head back to the tower, but stopped short. Elspeth stood at the gate next to a nervous camera man who completely neglected his camera.

"Elspeth!"

“Aye, Jamie.”

He gestured toward the north stones. “Did ye see then?”

“Aye.” She smiled slightly. “I saw.”

“My da’s been here the whole time,” he said, just in case she hadn’t known.

She waved her hand as if the detail didn’t interest her. Her gaze was fixed on his face. “I thought about what ye said, about trying to hide our friendship from Ian.”

“Aye?” The sound of his brother’s name still bothered him, especially when it came from Elspeth’s own tongue.

“It made no sense to me. Ye see, when Ian danced with me at the gathering, he told me he was grateful to ye, that he’d asked ye to keep me away from the other lads until Ian was free to woo me. So why would ye need to hide it from him?”

“*He did not* send me to ye. But I see ye ken it now.”

“Aye. I ken it now. But back then?” She shook her head. “It suddenly made sense, why ye wouldn’t kiss me much. And I thought ye’d been teasing me along on until ye could push me off on Ian. Ye see?”

Jamie only nodded, but inside he was pleased as a patted dog that the lass was seeing his brother in a truer light.

“So I was hurt, and wanted to make ye regret yer part.” She began walking forward and his heart tripped with every step she took. The rain danced around her, through her. The grass showed no sign that she passed over it. But his heart was aware. And he finally, *finally* felt as if someone was seeing him, not looking past him to locate his brother.

“That dream I dream?”

He nodded. “Yer nightmare?”

“Weel,” she said while she toyed with a lock of her hair. “I called it a nightmare because it made me feel so disloyal to Ian, imagining it was ye who blew me the kiss and not him. It’s why it upset me so.”

She stopped before him, but the teasing look was gone from her eyes. The lass was nervous, afraid even, which was made more amusing by the three men cowering by the gate, trying not to draw her attention.

“Jamie?”

“Aye.”

“Why do ye suppose I was able to feel yer touch when ye grabbed hold of me on the tower?”

He could tell she wanted him to touch her again, to see if they could repeat the anomaly. But he tucked his hands behind him rather than prove it couldn’t happen.

“I dinna ken, lass. I suppose my fright was so strong, it gave me the ability for that moment alone.”

“And why were ye so frightened?”

“Because I thought ye might fall from the edge. I didn’t know yet that ye liked to fling yerself from it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Only when I’m angry at handsome young Highlanders who try to tell me whom I love.”

He took a small step closer and lowered his voice. “Why did ye do it, Elspeth? The first time. Why did ye throw yerself from the tower?”

She jumped back, her eyes wide. “Jamie Houston, how could ye think such a thing? I’m a God fearing Scotswoman. I’d no sooner take my own life than kiss a boar hog.” She frowned. “I suppose Huey told ye this?”

Jamie nodded, ashamed to have believed the storyteller without asking anyone else.

“Did ye ken he also thinks I’m yer sister, Suisan?”

He nodded again.

“I dinna suppose ye noticed that the stones had rotted away from the south edge of the tower?”

“Aye. I noticed.”

“When I heard ye perished at Culloden, I took to the tower to mourn ye. I had no notion of the stones being loose, and I must have fallen against them in my misery. The side gave way. I remember feeling like I was flying. And then I remembered waking later and no one looked the same. They’d aged greatly. Time had passed, ye see?” She shook her head. “And ye thought I’d killed myself? And with child too?”

She gave him a very disappointed look that made him turn his head in shame, but she brought his attention back to her with a finger beneath his chin. The sense of touch startled both of them.

“How is it,” she began, but her attention was drawn to the edge of the graveyard.

He followed her gaze. The bright light was back, only this time it didn’t seem to hurt his eyes.

“I dinna ken, lass. But either ye’re becoming human, or I am turning back to spirit.” He took a tentative step toward the light. “Soni?” he whispered.

“*Aye, Jamie?*” The witch’s voice came dancing through the sodden leaves of the trees to his left, but there was no body to go with it.

“What about my appointment?” he asked. And he hoped, if the wee witch knew his heart so well, perhaps she’d understand that he’d had a change of it.”

“*Rest easy, my friend,*” said the voice he so cherished. “*Someone else will keep it for ye, no doubt.*”

He laughed. “No doubt.”

He reached behind him and Elspeth’s hand slipped quickly into his grasp. He pulled her forward, entwined their arms, and held tight.

He spoke toward the trees again. “Soni?”

“*Let go of yer anger, the pair of ye. It will be well with ye if ye do.*”

Jamie shrugged. “How can I hold on to anger when my arms are full of Elspeth?”

The love of his life nodded against his arm. It was the finest feeling in the world. Or out of it.

“*Get on with ye, laddie.*” Soni’s voice began to fade. “*And keep her close, aye?*”

He looked down into Elspeth’s smiling eyes and silently thanked his wee witch, for she’d given him yet another order he was more than happy to follow.

As the white engulfed them, he held tightly to the lass, as he’d been instructed, but even as he did so, he felt so many things fall away, to be left behind. And all that was truly important...

...went with him.

Chapter 18

Dawson let one of the locals of the crew drive the van back to the B&B. He was way too tired to be behind the wheel, let alone remember to drive on the wrong side of the road. He hoped, when they got there, that Matt would be waiting for them.

“Oy,” shouted the driver. “Isn’t that yer mate?” He quickly pulled to the side of the narrow road.

Dawson jumped out and hurried to the body nestled in the deep grass in the fetal position. The clothes were right. Brown painter pants, a wife-beater, and a denim shirt tied around his waist. And though his arms were bent and covering his head, they were the familiar, deep tan color that could only be Matt’s.

“Do ye think he was hit by a car?” Tuke worried next to him.

The body on the ground shook, snorted, then stretched. He’d only been sleeping!

Matt’s eyes flew open and he sat up quickly. He peeked past their legs, looking back down the road.

“Relax,” Dawson said, laughing with relief that his friend was alive. “The Houston ghost has moved on.”

Matt jumped to his feet and grinned. “And what about the other one? Jamie?”

“He’s went with her.”

“Aww. That’s cool.” They headed back toward the vehicle. “So, what do we do when we get home?”

Tuke paused with his hand on the van’s metal frame, a devious grin on his face. “We scrounge some money together... and high tail it to Culloden Moor!”

Matt reconsidered getting into the vehicle but eventually did. Dawson was just surprised that it took until they were half-way across the Atlantic before the guy turned in his notice.

